Min-Maxing My TRPG Build in Another World

Preach the Good Word of Mr. Henderson

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Preface

Tabletop Role-Playing Game (TRPG)

An analog version of the RPG format utilizing paper rulebooks and dice.

A form of performance art where the GM (Game Master) and players carve out the details of a story from an initial outline.

The PCs (Player Characters) are born from the details on their character sheets. Each player lives through their PC as they overcome the GM's trials to reach the final ending.

Nowadays, there are countless types of TRPGs, spanning genres that include fantasy, sci-fi, horror, modern chuanqi, shooters, postapocalyptic, and even niche settings such as those based on idols or maids.

My boots pound down on a road I've traveled all too many times before.

Before me lay my home. The chimney is ever so slightly tilted. There is a broken bit on the roof in the spot where my father once tried and failed to climb for repairs. The front door sticks out as the only bit that still looks new, its predecessor having been blown away in a storm many years ago.

There are many homes like it, but this is the only one that is mine.

I sprint toward it, opening the door and announcing my return.

"I'm home!"

Now that's *a proper homecoming.*

I slammed my mug onto the table with a weary grunt and wiped the foam from my lips. How the hell had I ended up drinking in the town meeting hall without so much as setting down my luggage or changing out of my travel gear?

It had all been going so well at first. Some old friends from the Watch climbed down from their lookout perch with cheers of, "Look who made it back alive!"

and the warm welcome was much appreciated until one of them *rang the canton bell*. Ordinarily used to herald the arrival of merchant caravans and the like, the sound drew out everyone; once they realized it was me, the whole town went into a frenzy.

Every loudly spoken word of welcome just served to attract more attention, and my outward appearance caused speculation to balloon before I could get a word in edgewise.

“Whoa, now! What’s with these killer horses?! You a magistrate now, kid?!”

“Nah, look at his fancy-schmancy clothes. I bet he caught some pretty noble lady’s eye! She’s probably keeping him like a pet.”

“You dolt! Then why’d he come back without a bodyguard? No, no, no, think: the lady who took the kids away was a mage, remember? His sister probably worked some magic or something! The little one, remember?”

The crowd merrily gossiped away, and I could do nothing to stem the deluge of wild conjecture. As an aside, Elisa was being referenced so vaguely because she’d spent most of her time in Konigstuhl sick and cooped up—most of our neighbors hadn’t gotten a chance to know her.

Hungry for entertainment to color the desolate winter months, the people of the canton came out one after another until I found myself being dragged off to the village’s reception building. People brought over the last of their wines and meads to gather around as I was propped up to tell tales of my travels.

Harmless questions like “How was the capital?” abounded—I chose not to ask why everyone knew the details of where I’d gone—with the men asking about pretty city girls and the women wanting to know more about the clothes and gems one could find in the metropolis. Mixed in were less reputable inquiries into urban pleasure districts, and also a suite of questions on the booze outside the canton; honestly, these people were better off joining the Wine God’s flock with how much they loved the stuff.

Shooing them all away would end up hurting my family’s name, so I buckled down and answered with good geniality. Someone was always ready to pour more liquor in my cup as soon as it went dry; that wasn’t the worst thing in the world, but...

“So did you see any adventurers?! What were they like?! Did you see any famous heroes?!”

“Heinz, why are *you* here slipped into the crowd?”

...I couldn’t get over the fact that the one pouring me a new drink was my eldest brother, his arm drunkenly slung over my shoulder.

“C’mon Erich, let us have this!”

“Did you see any pretty girls?! Any demihumans we’ve never seen?!”

It wasn’t just Heinz: the twins had found their way here too. My best guess was that Margit—who’d disappeared at some point amidst the chaos—had gone over to let my family know I’d returned. I was very grateful for how she’d thoughtfully given me a chance to spend time with them; it wasn’t as if she was just running away from the clamor of the party, of course.

“You know,” I grumbled, “I feel like the usual response would be to ask how your brother has been, don’t you?”

“Oh, come on! What’s the point in worrying about you when we know you have the cash to send letters and money home to us all the time?”

“Tell him, Heinz! Plus, what’s with those letters, anyway? Are you writing Elisa’s biography or something?! How much are you getting paid that you can use all that paper and ink?”

“And despite all your writings, not a *word* about the capital. You’re not getting away until we get our fair share of stories!”

Familiar voices and faces quipped at me, just as they always did. They’d all grown up in their own ways: Heinz was now fully bearded and truly looked the part as our head-of-household; Michael was dressed in surprisingly sharp fashion with his hair slicked back with some kind of oil; despite his dumb questions, Hans carried himself with enough poise to mistake him for someone else.

And it wasn’t just my family: everyone here brought back old memories. There were friends I’d run around the shelterbelt with as a kid, the adults who’d lovingly watched over us, and the old Harvest priest who drank harder than

anyone else in the building.

So sharing stories with them all was honestly a wonderful time...but, like, where was my heartfelt reunion with my family?! This wasn't what I'd been looking forward to!

Life just never went my way, I guess. Downing my sorrows alongside my drink, I fielded the idle crowd's questions until they were satisfied.

[Tips] Privacy is too high-minded a concept to be respected in a rural canton without entertainment.

Once the drunkards were too plastered to go on, I slipped out of the meeting hall, cradling my sloshing belly. Leaning against the handrail of the building's terrace, I exposed myself to the cool night air. It felt great: winter winds whisked away the drunken heat on my cheeks.

I'd completely forgotten how devoid of amusement the countryside was, and how that meant everyone was always looking for an excuse to throw a party. Looking back, the return of someone who'd gone off to the city to earn a living was only ever going to trigger this sort of reaction.

Biting the cork off a bottle I'd swiped, I took a swig of wine. All the alcohol filling up my empty stomach was sure to be bad news in the near future, but it was too late to go back at this point; I might as well see the final stop of where this train was headed.

Plus, my Heavy Drinker trait meant that I'd rarely ever gotten drunk before now. While I'd been given plenty of opportunities to sample the finest wines during my time under Lady Agrippina, the mental burden of the knowledge that "drunkenness equals death" had made it impossible to truly give myself up no matter how much I drank.

My memories of merry stupor were few and far between. The most recent one was probably when my friends and sister threw me a going-away party.

"Boy, that's sour."

Made for the masses in one of the Wine God's temples, the drink made up

with tartness what it lacked in body. Of course, the distilleries run by His faithful would never produce something truly *bad*, but it wasn't nearly up to par after a year spent enjoying the most refined specimens.

Yet in spite of all my gripes, the wine of my hometown was delicious. In fact, maybe this was what a good drink truly looked like.

"What are we going to do if the life of the party sneaks out?"

And it was all thanks to the familiar presences of those I loved.

"You're one to talk, Father. What brings you out into the cold?"

"I figured we might finally get a chance to sit down and talk."

My old man hadn't put up any protest to the festivities, but he hadn't been actively taking part either. Instead, he'd been on the edges of the room, watching over me and my brothers; now that I'd slipped out, he'd followed suit and took a seat beside me. Not only had he swiped a bottle just like me, but he had a bag of dried jerky in his other hand.

I wondered if it was because of his mercenary past: in a sea of wasted merrymakers, he'd remained aware enough to keep tabs on where everyone was. I hadn't been seriously trying to hide, but that he'd spotted me as I crept away from the party suggested that my dad may have been quite the warrior in his prime.

He wordlessly offered me a piece of meat, so I reached in and plucked one out of the bag. As I washed down the salty jerky with a mouthful of sour wine, I could feel the rustic flavors of my hometown seep into my tongue.

"You really managed to come home," he said.

"Yes," I said. "I really did."

"It...must've been a long road."

A thousand emotions bubbled up behind his words. I simply nodded and asked him to tell me how things were going; it felt like we were headed for a watery, sentimental talk, but I wanted my homecoming to be a happier affair.

After all, no one had grieved over my indentured servitude quite like my father.

Honestly, no one had been to blame. It wasn't anyone's fault that Elisa had been born a changeling, or that I had the talent to earn money as a noble's servant, and it definitely wasn't his fault that he couldn't pay the College's tuition outright. Our family may have owned our own land, but at the end of the day, we were rural farmers. What point was there to guilt when the sum easily cleared our total earnings year-on-year?

At most, we'd been unlucky. That was all there was to it.

So I would have much preferred hearing how things were going. I'd kept my family up to date on how Elisa and I were faring, but since I'd asked them not to reply—letters truly did cost a lot to send—I'd been worried about my family for a while now.

Heinz was sure to inherit the farm, but the fate of the twins could seriously alter the course of our household. As the second son, Michael had the option of staying at home, but only for so long now that we had a nephew. Hans, on the other hand, would need to find a good family to marry into soon, or he'd really be in trouble.

I'd figured the money spent on paper and ink would be better allocated to whatever my family needed, so I'd suppressed my desire to hear back; yet as soon as I got home and saw them all face-to-face, I couldn't help but worry. It was funny how that worked out.

"I can see all too well that everyone's in good health," I said, gesturing back inside. "But what about everyone's futures? I've come of age, which means the twins must be doing something by now."

My father stared at me, dumbfounded. I urged him on with the tip of my bottle and, after a moment of pause, he began to speak in a peaceful tone.

Apparently, my vivacious eldest brother had managed to grace me with another nephew and niece each. Right now, my sister-in-law Mina was carrying their fourth child in her belly.

...Which means that my dolt of a brother had left his pregnant wife and children behind to come drink today. *He really never changes,* I thought. Heinz was the same fool he'd been on the night of his wedding, where he'd gotten so worked up about my helmet-splitting feat that he'd never be able to talk back

to Miss Mina again.

Setting aside Heinz and his repeat offenses, in a twist of fortune, Michael had caught the eye of the village chief. My brother had married the man's second daughter; now that they'd settled down and had a child, he no longer had any need to live at home. *What a great stroke of luck.*

But most surprising of all was Hans: he was now serving the *magistrate himself*. The little boy who couldn't even go to the Watch tryouts without dragging his little brother along had grown up by leaps and bounds.

"Since you kept sending back all that money, we figured it'd only be right to let him have a try at school. At first, he was all embarrassed about going to class with a bunch of kids, but come spring, the magistrate picked him out to be a secretary at the castle."

As uncouth as it was to say myself, the cash I'd set aside for my family was enough to confidently assert that I was a good son. Seeing as Hans had been the only one not to receive an education, my parents had used the funds to give him a chance to attend the magistrate's private school.

Enrolling as an adult—the twins were just a year younger than Heinz, so they'd long since come of age—wasn't unheard of, per se, but it certainly was rare. That rarity, paired with Hans's newly discovered talent for writing, had been enough to draw the magistrate's attention.

After graduating from school, he'd spent half a year or thereabouts helping the village scribe and writing letters for the canton chief. Then, one day, the magistrate had come to scout him on account of his remarkable penmanship.

His salary was four drachmae—enough to comfortably provide for two people. Although it was a bit less than ideal if he wanted to start a family, he could always hope for more in the coming years if he kept working diligently. Besides, getting to work for the magistrate was a dream come true for anyone in the canton but firstborn sons. Realistically speaking, that was about as good as it got: on Earth, the equivalent would be clearing a civil service exam in one shot to secure a career in the public sector right out of college.

I was as surprised as I was happy. The days following me and Elisa's departure had gone swimmingly.

Hey, wait a second. The first son of our family was the head of a successful and independent farm; the second son had wedded into the village chief's family; the third son served the magistrate as a secretary; the first daughter was enrolled in the Imperial College of Magic, destined to become a noblewoman...and I was an unemployed adventurer-hopeful.

Huh? Am I the only one with zero career prospects?

I knew I'd chosen this path for myself, but I couldn't help but feel a touch of desolation. I knocked back the rest of my wine, but it tasted even more sour than before.

"Man," I sighed, "they're all doing well, huh?"

"It's all thanks to you, Erich."

"Oh, come on. That's not true."

Happenstance was a part of life, but at the end of the day, fate was determined by one's own skill and effort. Heinz's fertility obviously had nothing to do with me, nor did Michael's marriage. Even though Hans's new job was predicated on schooling that my gifts afforded him, the meat of his accomplishments came from his own talent. I was owed a bit of gratitude at the very most; the success itself wasn't thanks to me.

"Well," my father said, "we can leave it at that if that's how you want it."

"You don't sound all too convinced."

"Every parent wants to celebrate their kid's accomplishments. Let me talk you up, will you?"

With a hearty laugh, my old man patted me on the head. His palm was rough and his movements were rougher: he was basically just scrambling my hair. But the crude show of affection filled me with a joy unmatched by Lady Leizniz and her finest combs. In this moment, I felt like all my efforts since leaving home were being recognized and rewarded.

After a bit, both of us started to get embarrassed. We paused for a moment with awkward smiles, until my dad cleared the air by asking, "So what's your plan, anyway?"

I was hoping to stay until springtime, helping out around the house and resting up. Since I was barging in with two horses to look after, I was ready to pay in both money and labor; I may have given Rudolf a parting gift, but my purse was still fat enough to take care of me.

Once winter thawed, I would be off to the western frontier to become an adventurer.

I'd been working on this plan for a while now. Adventuring was mainly odd jobs, and quests to fight savage beasts or what have you were few and far between.

How could they not be? Humanity laid claim to vast swaths of the world, and danger had long since been expelled from the vicinity of our towns and cities. Economic development would grind to a halt if monsters popped up on every road between urban hubs.

An adventurer could expect to be a handyman, bouncer, or bodyguard, doing anything from searching for missing persons to repairing a broken roof. There was the occasional request to fight off a dangerous creature that had wandered into a nearby forest and the like, but that was well outside of one's expected everyday duties.

However, the same did not hold true on the remote frontier.

In undeveloped lands, nasty beasts still roamed free; highwaymen could sneak under sparse imperial patrols; and bandits thrived to the point where they were halfway to barbarian clans. If I could find my way to a place like that, then maybe the quixotic excitement I sought would await me.

Naturally, this also meant I would be in far greater danger. Daemons would rear their heads as a matter of course, and I had a real chance of running into phantasmal creatures and demibeasts that avoided populated regions. I would, in a word, be stepping foot outside the walled garden of civilization. It would be altogether different from the lazy tranquility of Konigstuhl or the austere security of Berylin.

Which means all the more opportunity to sell my name!

Make no mistake, though: as gung ho as I seemed, this wasn't a thoughtless

attempt to wander off into the middle of nowhere. I'd done my homework by speaking to adventurers in the capital and poring through books on the subject.

A munchkin feeds on data, and that isn't limited to skill data. Grasping the peculiarities of a region or its balance of power is all part of the package needed to Fast Talk a GM. I wasn't letting anything past me!

After thorough research, I'd set my sights on a city on the Empire's westernmost frontier: Marsheim, otherwise known as Ende Erde.

Ruled by the Mars-Baden clan—a branch of the imperial Baden duchy—Marsheim bordered several satellite states to the west. The capital city was of the same name, but was more frequently referred to by its nickname of Ende Erde, earned for being founded on the literal ends of all earth.

Margrave Mars-Baden didn't allow his territory to fall into anarchy, of course—the Empire's authority would come into question if a territory bordering foreign states was in a state of chaos—but it was markedly more dangerous compared to the stable regions I'd been to in the past.

Villains laid claim to land where the authorities were stretched too thin to purge them; fangs and claws stalked the teeming wilderness; nearby satellites danced between attractive trade partners and bombs waiting to go off; and the foreign powers further west offered unparalleled opportunity for all sorts of requests. The region was infamous among my kind: if you could make a name there as an adventurer, you could make it anywhere.

It was a lawless wasteland, not unlike the countries on either end of that infamous bridge.

Lands ripe with adventure were far from rare in the TRPG systems I'd so adored; they were convenient settings to start a campaign's worth of trouble in. Search for them, and the products of imagination revealed themselves to be a part of reality.

Once the snow was gone, I'd take to the muddy roads for two months and set off for the borderlands...to finally realize my dream.

But that wasn't all.

My dream was to be an adventurer, but not the kind of NPC who loitered

around pubs and told stories to newbies. No, I wanted to experience an honest-to-goodness, heart-pounding adventure. Some said that quixotic romance didn't exist at all; but then surely the legends of heroes wouldn't be with us today.

I knew it was rare, but I would chase true adventure. I was going to follow my dreams and see through a journey to live up to all my fantasies.

The landing point was clear; all that remained was to jump for it.

Once I got there, things would be the same as usual: it'd be up to my own skill. No matter what sort of life I lived, it wouldn't change the fact that I was a piece on the board, swayed by the clattering of dice. What more fun could be had than betting it all on myself? Snake eyes might follow me like old friends, but this was the path I was set on.

"I'm going to become an adventurer."

My longing was unrusted; my yearning was still vivid; my dream still burned in the depths of my soul. For all the years I'd lived between this world and the last, I was made to know that boys were ever boys, regardless of how old they were. Laugh at me if you wish; I'll laugh right back at you.

Who could blame me for wanting to be sung about in poems and songs? No great feat has ever been accomplished without equally great ambition.

"I see."

Two simple words—that was all that came from my father's mouth, and yet they pushed me forward like nothing else.

I truly was blessed. I didn't have to worry about my parents' future: our family was so well off that I could shake our whole house down and not find a single speck of unease. Very few could go off chasing their wildest imaginations with as clear a mind as me.

I really, really am lucky.

"Oh, by the way." Upon finishing his own drink, my dad tapped his hands together as if he'd remembered something. "Your mom was really mad. 'What does he think he's doing, drinking as soon as he gets home?!' and all that."

“What?!”

That’s not fair! I didn’t start it!

“Mina was right there with her, talking about how you should’ve put up your stuff and brought in your horses first. Looks like we’re all in for an earful when we get home.”

“Wait, wait, wait, *what?!* That doesn’t make any sense! I’m *definitely* not in the wrong here! Father, you have to help defend me!”

“Ah, but the more people we’ve got, the shorter the personal lectures are, so. Besides, I put in a donation at the church so we’d get some more liquor.”

“So *that’s* why we didn’t run out of wine! What the hell do you think you’re doing?!”

Twinkling crisply up above, the crescent moon laughed as I marched off to meet my fate.

[Tips] In the Empire, the frontier refers to the lands bordering foreign nations. The keepers of these realms are chosen from the uppermost echelons of high society, and are known as margrave.

Winter of the Fifteenth Year

Party Formation

Adventurers come in every shape and color: wannabe heroes from the countryside, impoverished beggars looking for better lives, exiled criminals, disguised nobles, *etc.* Anything goes, to the point where those who can freely speak their background are relatively reputable for that fact alone.

Dissimilar PCs each built to their own player's interest can come together as a party at a bar, by taking the same quest, or—when the show must get on the road—because they all happen to be childhood friends.

The autumn festival was held every year just before the harsh winter months; it was an exercise in abundance to offset the meagerness of the dried rations that would follow. As a result, there were scant few things left to be served for the young man's unexpected homecoming.

Still, the folks of the canton scrounged up whatever they could while the leadership of the village, forced to oblige their citizens' enthusiasm or lose face, bent and offered up more to fuel the festivities. Every family home had its share of sauerkraut fermenting in jars, which they brought over unreserved; the villagers had picked fruits and vegetables symbolizing the last hurrah of autumn which now lined the town hall tables; and of course, key to any good imperial feast, a mountain of wurst was stacked up for all to share.

There was also enough alcohol to build a lake, but that was primarily the work of the up-and-coming Johannes and his family. In backwater towns, the well-off were ever under pressure to share their wealth, so as to excuse themselves from accusations of hoarding. To their fellow citizens, this wasn't a fancy rich person putting on airs: anyone who treated others with enough booze to black out on was a bona fide hero.

"Argh... I really missed out."

While the heroes of the night were circled around the youngest of their flock, asking crass questions and booming with laughter, the women hung around the corners of the room, leisurely enjoying the unplanned food and drink.

“Mmmm? Missed out on what?”

“On, *Erich*, duh. Who would’ve thought he’d come home all rich?” Like everyone else in eyeshot, a young mensch girl named Hilda found herself absolutely plastered. She fumbled around with her fork, poking at a bit of wurst, and her blush was bright enough to plainly announce her drunkenness on its own.

“Oooooh... Yeah. I didn’t even think he’d come home at all.” Beside the drunken girl was another of her ilk: her mind marinated in mead, her floresiensis friend Alicia was just as well done.

The two of them were Margit’s age, but curiously enough, that wasn’t their only similarity: they were all unwed. Although love was easier for canton-dwellers to seek than it was for the nobility, it was not as free a pursuit as it was for the common urchins of the city streets. Merely finding a boy was not the issue, but rather finding one who matched their social castes; thus they had yet to pair off with anyone.

That said, it wasn’t all doom and gloom. Hilda was the only daughter to farmers successful enough to employ several sharecroppers on their property; her distant relatives would fork over a good second or third son in due time. Alicia’s household was one of the few certified to raise *silkworms*, and as the eldest daughter, she would no doubt receive bids for her hand from prosperous merchants sooner rather than later.

Yet that didn’t change that they were single. Yes, they could tell themselves that the timing hadn’t lined up or that they hadn’t gotten any good offers, but to be unmarried at eighteen in the Empire was just shy of seeming un*wanted*. In two more years, they’d be considered to have missed their chance. At times like these, they envied the freedom afforded to those beneath them in class.

Those who came from small-to-middling farming families could grow close and drift apart of their own accord. Nuptial taxes meant they couldn’t quite tie the knot without thought, but they had few barriers when it came to societal

expectations among fellow peasants—something that weighed all too heavily on the relatively privileged girls.

The peasant farmers never sent their romantic attention upward, and so the canton's elite never looked downward. In fact, the daughters of more successful families tended to look down on such emotionally driven relationships...except one.

Guaranteed a stable future was the eldest daughter of the magistrate's official huntsman: Margit.

Within Konigstuhl, Johannes was of respectable stature, but was ultimately only a middling farmer—he didn't employ any sharecroppers. His *fourth* son would ordinarily be a very difficult sell for someone of Margit's level.

Had Erich been a normal boy for whom the arachne's affection was based solely on a flight of fancy, dozens of others in the canton would begin to protest: why should she settle for a mediocre farmer's youngest when their second or third son was right there? Marrying into a family that received its work straight from the magistrate was a powerful draw.

Yet the boy had enough going for him to expel all doubt. At five, he'd learned the hymns at church; he had enough talent for woodworking to support his family with it; he was so smart that he'd learned the palatial tongue not by attending school, but simply from his childhood friend's personal tutoring.

But he was best known for how he'd managed to stick with the Watch's infamously harsh training, to the point where the people of the canton were unequivocally convinced he'd one day be taken not as part of the reserves, but as a full-time watchman. Though the boy didn't seem to be aware, he'd left a strong impression with the authorities of Konigstuhl as a good, capable kid.

It was a fairy tale come to life: A young boy bravely conquers every trial, winning the right to stand by his first love. But alas! Fate is cruel, and She tears the pair apart. How could any mere peasant hope to return from his servitude in the capital?

"I wonder how much it costs to study magic under a noble..."

"Ummmm... Maybe five drachmae?"

“That’s like loose change for a noble. I heard that it’s harder than the magistrate’s school—so hard that you get to be a bureaucrat if you graduate. An imperial officer! Like, *you’d* be the one ordering magistrates around!”

“Whoooa. Then maybe...*ten* drachmae?”

“No, I’m sure it’s so much money that us country bumpkins can’t even imagine it. And, like, you have to pay for food and stuff too. Living like a noble has to cost money just to breathe, I bet.”

Although the pair didn’t have any concrete numbers, their perception was on the money. To apprentice under a noble with the promise of becoming a noble oneself—the caveat of attaining professorship notwithstanding—cost a fortune so massive that a farmer wouldn’t ever be able to afford it even if they could reattempt their whole life as many times as they wanted to.

Truth be told, the outfit tailored for Elisa’s high society debut alone had cost significantly more than the taxes of every household in the canton combined. A decent chunk of that expense originated with the influential and enthusiastic Lady Leizniz preparing the very best for the young magus-in-training, but still.

In other words, the people of Konigstuhl knew Erich as *the boy who can earn that much money*. He’d come home wearing high quality clothes, neatly kept hair, and atop a majestic horse, for crying out loud—his return was more triumphant than the knights in shining armor that graced sappy love stories.

“So you know, I was kinda the nice older girl for him too. When we were kids, I used to play foxes-and-geese with him, right? And we were the mom and dad when we played house sometimes too.”

“Ohhhh, so that’s what you mean when you said you missed out.”

Alicia watched her friend sulkingly jab her fork into a weiner and was overcome with a strange sense of pity. Hilda wasn’t a bad girl. She was just a little too well-off, and her frustrations had convinced her in retrospect that she’d missed a big catch when, in reality, she hadn’t cast a line to begin with.

The boy was simply an egg of Columbus. How could anyone have known that the fourthborn son to a farmer would earn a sum of money *literally* unimaginable to his peers in three short years?

“I wonder if I can’t try getting closer to him now... I mean, he’s gotten really cute.”

“Ooooh, I get that. He always did look a lot like Miss Helena.”

So, while the boy was stuck with his rowdy brothers, the single women watched over him like hawks. They didn’t know why he’d come home, but if he was going to stay for a while, this could be their chance.

Well, it could be, but it wasn’t.

“Whatever might you two be chatting about?”

“Eep!”

“Wah!”

A silent specter had snuck into their midst. Appearing as if from thin air, a head poked out from between Hilda and Alicia’s, with an arm sliding over each of their shoulders. A dreadful chill pressed into their necks as steel blades... No, wait, those were just tin mugs, cooled by the winter air.

However, for a moment, the pair truly believed the cups were daggers; they felt no different from deer and boars ready to be hung up as game.

“M-Margit!”

“Tonight is a merry night,” the arachne said with a rapturous smile. “It would be such a waste to spend it gloomily poking at cold sausages. Shall we drink?”

Cold sweat ran down their backs as realization struck. Looking around, the other unwed girls and young widows who’d been gossiping much the same as them were now silent. In their place were tables quieter than those at a wake.

The dots connected instantly. Someone was going around dousing passions before they could even be kindled, and they had been seen as an ember.

A faint jingle rang in their ears. It came from the pink earpiece the huntress always had on—one shared by the central figure of tonight’s party.

“H-Haha, ha. Oh, please, Miss Margit. Ours was hardly a conversation of much note, now was it?”

“I-Indeed. Frivolous talk, truly.”

Sporting forced smiles and retreating into unprompted palatial speech, the pair tried to worm their way out. Alas, Alicia had made a mistake in her choice of words.

“Frivolous, you say? Then surely you won’t mind me intruding. After all, the three of us have been friends since childhood, haven’t we?”

You idiot! Hilda shot her friend a glare.

I’m sorry! Alicia squealed in her heart.

[Tips] No matter the era, people will sing songs about the romantic freedoms of those who have nothing.

The day after my boneheaded welcome home, I found myself chopping logs in the front yard of my house.

“Oww...”

Rubbing my aching knees between every swing, I loaded log after log onto a stump so I could turn them into firewood with my hatchet. Sitting on one’s own feet was traditional Rhinian posture for a guilty party being yelled at, and my legs were currently dead after hours stuck in the pose.

I’d learned that Emperor Richard himself had popularized this tradition by forcing it upon his vassals—something about lessons being harder to forget when they were beaten into the body—but I couldn’t help but feel like the Emperor of Creation had done us a disservice. Rhinian mensch were not built to sit like that for long periods of time, dammit.

I doubt there was any need to explain, but my father, brothers, and I had received a proper lecture from the women of our house—and *man* had they been ready to serve it.

My mother first said she was happy to see me, and then started shouting that she didn’t raise me to be the kind of blithering idiot to go off drinking before setting down my luggage. When I tried to pipe up to defend myself, she got even more upset, asking me what kind of adult I was if I couldn’t even stand up against peer pressure. She was right, so I obediently accepted my scolding for

the rest of the sermon.

Looking back, a lot of my worst episodes had been the product of me not setting my boundaries firmly enough: everything from Lady Agrippina's miscellany to the events on the road home could apply. In hindsight, while I would've had to go back to the town hall eventually, I definitely could have shaken the drunks off by demanding that they let me go home to change first.

As a matter of course, my father and brothers were then chewed out so thoroughly that it made my lecture seem cute in comparison. Their wives mercilessly berated them with questions like, "Is this the example you want to set when our fourth child is on the way?" or "Do you understand what it means to be a father of five?" Though I'd never been in the parent's seat, using their fatherhood against them seemed to be a serious hit on my dad and Heinz.

But, hey, those two had dished out money to make the celebrations even bigger than they would've been. I couldn't cover for them even if I wanted to.

The twins had it no better. Statements like "And you think you can call the village chief family?" and "Maybe you should quit your job under the magistrate before you embarrass yourself with something like this," slammed them to the point where I felt major secondhand embarrassment. The worst part was that everything was based in truth, meaning we couldn't even make a peep to defend ourselves.

We really are family, I thought. When memories of my past life had flooded in as a child, I'd thought that my emotional development was complete; but it turns out that I truly did draw the same blood.

Just look at how we all let ourselves get caught up in the heat of the moment only to suffer the consequences of our actions later. We were spitting images of each other. Blood was ever thicker than water, I guessed. Some might protest that *my* rashness was a character flaw I'd brought with me across worlds, but, hey, we were literally related. It probably ran in the family. This wasn't just me making excuses, I swear.

Digressions aside, the scolding had begun first thing in the morning and had gone on and on for hours. Both my mother and sister-in-law understood that funding the party went a long way in boosting our family's reputation, but they

also knew that any word of praise would just go to our heads. They'd cracked the whip hard, and I'd lost all sensation in my legs near the end.

I had only gotten away because the lecture had pivoted to bring up Elisa, and I'd used the opportunity to mention that I'd brought gifts picked out by our family princess. As guilty as I felt using Elisa's goodwill to leave my dad and brothers behind, I seriously couldn't have taken it any longer.

Even that hadn't been enough to erase my wrongdoing, though, so here I was hard at work the day after I returned. The others were still stuck inside to make quite the peculiar scene: two successful heads of their respective households, a bridegroom to the village chief's family, and one of the magistrate's personal secretaries kneeling on the ground. I doubted they'd be able to walk straight for the rest of the day.

Thank goodness we'd possessed the good sense to go shopping for nice fabrics and pretty hair accessories before I'd left Berylin. Paired with Elisa's handwritten letters and an oil portrait from Lady Leizniz—I'd been genuinely disgusted when I'd asked for one and she'd answered that she'd prepare as many as I dared to ask for—the gifts had improved everyone's moods considerably.

Elisa and I had regularly written back, so it wasn't as if they were hearing from her for the first time, but being able to literally see how much she'd grown was an experience all its own. The men gooed and gaaed over the painting as proof that their little girl truly was the cutest on the planet, while the women were proud and excited that she'd grown up to be such a great lady that she could have artwork commissioned.

My one reservation was that the oilwork wasn't the product of a painter inspired by her beauty, but that of an undead vitality glorifier. Just as every commoner dreamed of being taken under their magistrate's wing, every woman had indulged in fantasies of a Prince Charming spotting their beauty from within the crowd to whisk them away.

Not that an average Prince Charming would make the cut, of course. Her hypothetical white knight would need to, at the very least, be able to wipe the floor with me in a duel, pamper her harder than Lady Leizniz, and protect her

with more political might than Lady Agrippina.

Tangents notwithstanding, the painting would surely get my mother and sister-in-law excited about how Elisa was doing. Everyone had been too preoccupied with my return yesterday, but seeing a postcard-sized cutout of her in a stylish black evening gown with gray frills would certainly drive home that she'd grown up to be a lovely lady.

As far as the men's gifts...those could wait until tomorrow. I had hoe and plow heads from a high quality manufacturer in the capital, alongside some daggers for self-defense. But those aside, I very much doubted that bringing out rare foreign liquors would do them any favors in the middle of their scolding.

"Phew."

After chopping up what seemed like enough firewood to be off the hook, I felt a faint tingling sensation. I wanted to upgrade my Presence Detection with how useful it was, but I had other places to allocate my experience; it'd have to wait for now.

Today, I turned around with a good bit of leeway to see my old partner bundled up in a stuffed coat and mid-flight toward me. Realizing that I'd seen her coming, her expression was a mix of confusion and surprise as I caught her. Holding her by the armpits, I swung her around clockwise like one might a child until all the momentum was dissipated; otherwise, one or both of us might get hurt.

"Good morning, Margit."

"Eager to chalk up your side of the board, I see."

I held her with a satisfied grin while she pointed her lips in a disappointed pout. While the expression would look unmannerly on most, she just looked plain cute; it was hard to believe she was two years my senior.

"Were you going easy on me because you thought I was hungover?"

"As if the spirit of liquor has ever overstayed its welcome for you. Besides, I never hold back, you know?"

Before I could set her down, Margit slipped her arms around my neck and

perched up as she always did. The weight on my neck felt lighter than it used to. As small as I still was, I'd grown considerably since when we were kids: she used to come up to the top of my hips, but was now only as tall as the split in my legs.

Also of note was her cute sense of fashion. Arachne were weak enough to the cold that I'd seen her all fluffed up many times in the past, but this was the first time she'd appeared wearing individual leg warmers on each of her spidery limbs. I wondered if she'd made them herself in the years I'd been gone.

But more than that, I wondered why she was all bundled up to come visit so early in the day.

"Well, the gentlemen kept you all to themselves last evening. I thought today would be my turn to hear all about your travels."

When I earnestly asked, she answered, just as free of affectation. Last night had indeed been for the boys, with most of the women present just nibbling on snacks and sipping on drinks. It had been blatantly obvious that Margit had given me space to goof off with my brothers and old friends.

If she was here now to catch up, then I was more than happy to oblige. That said, the house wasn't exactly the most hospitable place right now, so I took her over to the stable.

We walked in to see our old farm horse Holter relaxing next to the Dioscuri. Neither Castor nor Polydeukes were the rough and rowdy sort, so they got along just fine.

"Looking at them again, your horses really are majestic. If I'm not mistaken, they're war horses, aren't they?"

"That's right. They're, osten...uh. They're some kind of military breed."

I vaguely recalled being told that they were a mix between the brawny horses from the central reach of the continent mixed with more laid back horses from our region in the west, but this was all secondhand knowledge I'd learned at the College stables. I'd been more focused on actually working, so I couldn't quite remember it all clearly.

"How many gold coins does it take to buy a steed like this? You must've been

hard at work.”

“Actually, these two were a gift from my master—er, my former master. They used to pull her carriage, but now that they’re past ten years old, she decided...”

Taking a seat next to the stable, I used some of the firewood I’d chopped to begin setting up a bonfire. I felt a bit chilly in spite of the cotton in my clothes, so Margit must’ve been freezing. Thinking about it, having her right on top of my lap was a rather daring seating arrangement, but I didn’t feel a hint of embarrassment from it. I suppose it was a bit late to be worrying about such things between the two of us.

The conversation over how I came about my horses then moved to the time immediately after I left the canton. One by one, the memories resurfaced and spilled forth—each too vivid to ever forget.

Now that I was talking about them, I had to ask: why the hell was I still alive? These weren’t even close to the sort of bullshit a twelve-year-old should be surviving.

Pushing past how palpable my rotten luck was, I packed together some leaves and twigs to act as a fire starter—when epiphany struck. This was my chance to surprise Margit: after all, I wasn’t going to hide my magic from my partner.

I told her to keep her distance and then wove together a simple firemaking cantrip. A spark not unlike the tiny embers at the end of a cigarette jumped onto the dried leaves and gave rise to a small plume of smoke.

“My!”

“Heh heh,” I gloated, “isn’t that cool?”

“It’s marvelous! You won’t ever need a tinderbox!”

Forget magia—mages from the nearest city would scoff at this parlor trick. But it was enough to wow Margit, since she knew nothing of magecraft. I announced with a smug grin that I’d learned to use magic while juggling blocks of firewood with my Unseen Hands.

Her competitive side thoroughly stirred up, she reached into her coat to pull

out a necklace. It was a simple accessory: just a fang with string slipped through. Yet the daggered tooth jutted out from her small hand like a massive dagger. Few animals could grow teeth longer than an adult man's index finger. This had to be...

"A great wolf's tooth. The leader of its pack, of course."

The huntress proudly handed me her trophy; that it was on her person was proof enough that this had been her own handiwork. Upon felling a particularly difficult mark, hunters were prone to taking a piece of their kill with them, as if to lay claim to the strength that had given them grief.

Judging from the size of the fang, the wolf it had come from must've been as big as a full-grown mensch, if not bigger. Scarred by legends of the infamous Gray King, the Trialist Empire had a history of hunting wolves with prejudice. Nowadays, the only ones left were the especially strong and clever. That she'd taken down such a daunting foe was genuinely astounding.

"It had wandered into the shelterbelt near town. The children love to play there, so I was determined to hunt it down with haste."

"Wow... Come on, don't leave me hanging."

Margit regaled me with the story of how she tracked down the beast, and in my excited state, I returned the favor with tales of adventure from the capital. We went back and forth, never running out of things to share even as the fire began to dwindle. We talked and talked and talked, as if to bury the time we'd spent apart; we lapped up one another's every word to quench an insatiable thirst for companionship.

Yet the end had to come eventually. The Sun, hurried to make His winter rounds, was already directly above. Smoke began to billow from the chimneys of Konigstuhl as everyone prepared their lunches; we would need to head in for a meal too.

But with my vocal cords all warmed up, this was a good chance to tell her something important. No matter how long we'd been together; no matter what promises we'd made; and no matter how sure I was that she knew what was going on, there was something I had to say—not because the world expected it of me, but because *I* expected it of me.

Cutting off our merry chatter, I stood up with Margit in my arms and placed her down where I'd been sitting.

"Whatever might be the matter?"

The question was fueled not by confusion, but by anticipation: how would I entertain her next? Evidently, a past life's worth of experience still didn't suffice to get the upper hand against her. I guess dumb, bumbling men were ever a step behind ladies in the realm of emotional literacy.

Had I been speaking to my old chum in the capital, I would've put my brain in high gear to speak with great drama, but while Margit understood sophisticated turns of phrase, she had no love of pretension.

So let me speak from the heart.

I got on my knees so that I could look up right into her eyes. Her amber gems were half-covered by a playful squint as she cheerfully watched to see how I'd dance in her palm.

I steeled myself and asked, "Do you remember the promise I made you when I left the canton?"

She let out a ringing laugh and teased, "You'll have to remind me."

I'd left at twelve and come back at fifteen. She was now seventeen—on the cusp of being forgotten and unwanted. Fifteen to seventeen was the average window of marriage in the Empire, and anyone approaching twenty would all but have missed their chance; I had made her wait in these precious years of early adulthood.

It would be all too easy to think that, since she'd waited for me until now, surely she would spoil me a little longer. But I couldn't do that: to take advantage of her would be to destroy the trust we shared. It takes two to lean on one another.

She was kind, but she did not coddle. When it came down to it, there was a line she wouldn't cross—that she wouldn't let anyone else cross, either. Margit was a strong, strong woman.

How else would she have me so smitten?

“I finished my servitude early, just like I promised.”

“Oh, I *do* recall something like that.”

Looking down on me with a joyful giggle, she added another provocation: plenty of people had come to her family for “talks” in the past three years.

Of course they had. She was a wonderful woman, and that wasn’t even her only draw. Sure to succeed her father as the magistrate’s personal huntsman, she boasted a bountiful future. Rumors on the wind of someone not even in town would hardly be enough to deter someone wanting to make a pass at her.

Yet she had found me before anyone else. What more reason did a man need to hold his head high?

“But you waited for me to fulfill my promise. So Margit, won’t you let me ask you again?”

I wasn’t so uncouth as to mention that she’d been the one to *make* me promise. At the end of the day, I’d done so of my own volition, and I’d come home to see my word through. To take the initiative here was what it meant to be a man.

“I want you to watch my back forevermore. Won’t you go on an adventure with me?”

I tucked down my head and extended my hand. It was all but a proposal.

The giggling grew into contented laughter. A moment of silence dragged on, long enough for me to feel the embers burn me where I stood; until at last, she took my hand.

“Good boy. Leave it all to me.”

“...Thank you.”

I really had lucked out with my childhood friend.

“I shall lend you my strength. So that perilous shadows will not tread on you; so that you will not tread on perilous shadows. I will go on ever ahead to drive away danger; I will stay ever behind to watch over you in sleep.”

“Then I will follow closely so that no blade will reach you. I will stand in front

to fell your foes; I will stand behind to shield your rear. No sword, no arrow, shall ever fall upon you."

"Well, then," she giggled, "with one oath fulfilled, how about we make another to take its place?"

Jumping to me with the footwork of a dancer, she came down to match me at eye level. Her eyes stared into mine, just like they once had on that fateful evening—when we'd pierced our ears on that twilit hill.

"Swear to me that you will give it your all—that you will live the adventure you truly dream of."

"I swear to you. I haven't changed since the day I was twelve. I will become an adventurer—I won't break or bend."

"Can you promise me that, even if you'd die the moment you break it? Even if I were to kill you with my own two hands?"

"You don't even need to ask."

Her usual mischievous grin faded away, leaving only a gentle smile of a loving mother. She said, "Good boy," again, and scooped up a bit of my hair, placing her lips onto it.

"Then I'll go with you," Margit answered. "To the ends of the earth in the west; to beyond the Southern Sea; to the snowcaps of the north; to the desert sands covering the east."

"Thank you," I said. "I'm sure anywhere in the world will be wonderful with you leading the way."

And so, I came to find my first party member. Inseparable and hard to come by, ours would be a grand adventure.

[Tips] The average age of marriage in the Trialist Empire is said to be fifteen to seventeen, but this is generally only true for firstborn sons and daughters who will not inherit their family business or title. Depending on occupation and stature, this figure can shift slightly.

As we basked in the warm afterglow of our precious oath, a biting gale whizzed by, making Margit sneeze.

“Dear me,” she said. “A single bonfire really isn’t enough, is it?”

“O-Oh! Sorry, Margit, let me add some more wood! Er, wait, would you rather I block off the cold with magic?!”

Shoot, I totally lost track of the cold! Margit had told me long before that arachne suffered aching joints and overall lethargy in the winter elements, even when properly geared for the weather. I should’ve set up a climate-controlled barrier instead of just starting a fire. *Ugh, I’m such a dolt.*

But just as I began weaving the spell together, she daintily dabbed at her nose with a napkin and hopped down, taking my hand in hers.

“No, this is the perfect occasion to change scenery. Won’t you come with me somewhere warmer?”

“Somewhere warmer?”

“But of course. After all, these sorts of talks are best paired with a greeting to one’s parents, aren’t they?”

Huh? Before I could so much as cock my head, she dragged me off to the edge of the canton with astonishing strength.

“W-Wait, but this is—”

“Come, come, in you go. It’s much too cold outside. Snowy days are unbearable no matter how much cotton I stuff.”

I’d been led to a small, sturdily built house. Most homes in Konigstuhl were simple stone structures, but this was one of the few that boasted a mortar-coated exterior—a flame retardant that signified it was primarily fashioned out of wood instead. Reinforced wooden walls gave space to stuff insulation in between the two layers; this sort of architecture was popular in the Empire among the races weakest to the cold.

Yes, we were at Margit’s house.

“Stop, wait, hold on—I haven’t planned out what I’m going to say yet!”

“Isn’t it rather late to be worrying about that? Just speak plainly and explain the reality of the situation.” Margit opened the door and announced, “I’m home!”

While I was shaking in my boots trying to think of how best to break the rather significant news, she pushed on without a care in the world. I guess it was ever easy to be laid back in one’s own home.

“My, my. Welcome home.”

Margit’s mother, Corale, greeted us as we entered a room hot with hearth fire. She looked young enough to be Margit’s sister, and the way her hair was tied just below her neck gave off a gentle impression...or at least, it would have, had she not been wearing traditional arachne garb that exposed vast swaths of skin and accessories.

She had at least twice as many ear piercings as her daughter, not to mention the dangling piece on her navel or the litany of intricate tattoos snaking across her bare shoulder and stomach. In particular, the one curling up to cradle her navel piercing looked like a symbol of lust. Back when I’d first seen her, I’d been terribly spooked: her copious inking felt like bizarre fetishism and clashed severely with the impression of her features.

Corale was one of the huntsmen of the canton. Famously, she’d fallen in love with Margit’s dad at first sight and immediately quit adventuring to woo him.

“Oh dear, oh my—if it isn’t little Erich. It’s been so long. I had heard you’d come back, but I almost didn’t recognize you.”

“L-Long time no see, Miss Corale. You’re exactly as I remember you...”

No, seriously, it was *scary* how little she’d changed. That she was the same age as my own mother had to be some kind of scam; she *had* to be an outlier, even among jumping spider arachne, right? I knew their bodies tended to decline rapidly near the ends of their lives instead of being spread out like mensch, but she was so incomprehensibly unchanging that I had my suspicions she was an immortal.

“Oh, look at how big you’ve gotten, you. I can’t call you a little boy anymore, can I, young man? No wonder I’ve been feeling so old lately; you know, I found

a gray hair the other day and—”

“Mother,” Margit cut in, “I don’t think we ought to keep our guest standing in the doorway.”

“Oh my, how rude of me. I’m sorry, little Erich.”

I was offered the only mensch chair in the house; despite my reservations, I sat down. Seating arrangements in the Trialist Empire were no different from my past life: the deeper into a house the seat was located, the more important the person was...which meant that this spot belonged to the father of the house. It looked like he wasn’t in right now, but Margit’s father Mister Heriot must ordinarily have sat here.

Speaking of Mister Heriot, he’d grown gray enough—for what reason I refused to ask—to look two generations removed from Miss Corale, but remained an active huntsman to this day. There was a reason Margit considered both her parents as teachers of the hunt: he’d earned the magistrate’s trust long before meeting the arachne adventurer. I had no cause to doubt her impression.

“I’m sorry we don’t have anything to treat you with. You know how winter is.”

Yet despite her words, my partner’s mother dexterously skittered to and fro and up and down on her spidery legs until a wonderful tea set was ready to serve. Out came the Rhinian classic of red tea alongside a very, *very* tough bit of wheat-based winter bread. To make the bread edible, it was paired with a watery stew of candied fruits; with an almost totally black sheen, this classic countryside ration was probably made from nearby raspberries.

“So, what brings you all this way? It isn’t every day someone comes knocking on a huntsman’s door during hunting season.”

The fruit jam was incredibly sweet, probably to help pack a lot of calories when on the hunt. The tea had been made on the bitter end, and with the bland, hard bread, the three paired perfectly. So perfectly, in fact, that the flavor distracted me enough to knock me off-tempo.

She’s good. Although Miss Corale had a sweet smile on, she was a cunning woman. By whittling away at my guard with an air of friendliness and

scrumptious snacks, she'd found her timing to steer the conversation to her own design. As a former adventurer, she no doubt had ample experience in negotiation—in fact, she may even have been the face of her party.

"I came here today because I have something very important to tell you," I said.

"Oh, you have me all giddy. But I'm sorry, dear, I already have Heriot."

"Mother!"

Suffering an unexpected racy joke from a taken woman nearly had me spit out my tea. Her daughter went red with anger and embarrassment, but Miss Corale herself displayed her maturity by keeping a cool smile throughout.

She's really *good. I can't let my guard down.* After holding back a cough with sheer force of will, I nonchalantly wiped the bleb of tea at the edge of my mouth. Sitting up, I looked into the woman's eyes; they were the same amber as my partner's.

The news I was to deliver wasn't anything to be ashamed of. All I had to do was hold my head high and say it.

"Miss Corale, I—"

Was it thanks to my diligent training, day in and day out? Or was it my long nights spent working in the shadows and waiting for ambushes?

Either way, I managed to catch the throwing knife that had come flying at my face.

"*Mother!*"

Thankfully, the dagger was still sheathed; I wouldn't have died no matter what. Still, a failed reaction would probably have seen me break a front tooth or two—it had been thrown *that* fast.

I'd sensed next to no intent, and Miss Corale's windup had been practically nonexistent. She'd gone from sipping tea in a relaxed position to attacking in an instant. This went beyond natural prowess: she'd personally honed these skills.

Even though I'd known she was strong, her abilities had surpassed my expectations. In the specialized field of assassination, she was even more

masterful than Miss Nakeisha. Had I not already been nervous—or even had Margit not warmed me up with an ambush this morning—I doubted I would've been able to counter.

"What do you think you're doing?!" Margit shouted.

"What does it look like? I'm having a little taste to see if he's man enough to whisk away my eldest daughter."

"A...taste?"

"Look at this face," Miss Corale said, turning to me. "There are only two things you two could be here to talk about looking so serious: either you want my daughter or you've gotten her pregnant out of wedlock."

The statements just kept getting more scandalous. At this point, the surprise of being attacked out of the blue was completely gone.

But come to think of it, I mean, she wasn't completely wrong. Our promise had, in some ways, basically been a proposal; that thought kept me from responding right away.

"Oh? If you aren't answering, does that mean it's the latter? My husband and I won't cause a fuss over you two seeing each other before marriage, but to dress her up for the ceremony with a baby aboard will certainly be a challenge..."

"Mother! Would you—agh! Please, just leave it at that! The only one who's allowed to toy with Erich is me!"

Yeah, you tell—hey. Wait a second, I don't know about that last part.

"Well, jokes aside, you managed to catch the dagger. Very well. You're here to take away my daughter, aren't you?"

"Miss Corale..."

"I still remember how you were preparing to become an adventurer before you left the canton. And how you were sweet-talking our precious heir in the process."

Though I felt like "sweet-talking" was a bit misleading, I couldn't say anything back. It was true that I'd told Margit I'd feel more confident with her by my side,

and our episode on the twilit hill definitely approached that level.

“To think a boy from a nice, respectable family would take yet another girl from a good family and run off to be a sellsword. I suppose blood truly does flow from parent to child.”

“Mother...”

“I was an adventurer, and Johannes ran away from home to become a mercenary. Between the two of us, I’d figured at least one of our children would carry on the torch, but I never would have guessed it would be his most well-behaved son.”

Miss Corale placed a hand on her cheek and sighed; she must’ve had her fair share of tribulations as an adventurer. Her expression betrayed her worry as she looked at the two troubled children in front of her.

“I won’t complain, though. My daughter’s getting up there in age, you know.”

“Can you *not* put it that way?” Margit cut in.

“But you are. You’re one step shy of being an unwanted bride.”

“An un*granted* bride! The truth is shameful enough as is—don’t make it any worse! Are you doing this on purpose?!”

“Of course I am.”

“The nerve of you...”

“I *am* your mother, after all.”

Her smug smile was just like her daughter’s, and I could easily see where Margit had learned to tease others.



Evidently, the dagger was the extent of my trial; Miss Corale's attention had shifted squarely to Margit. Frankly, I didn't have any gripes with the test. Had I been in her position, I would surely have brought out a wooden sword or the like to gauge my strength too. Who could blame her? This was her kid's future on the line: she couldn't just entrust her daughter to some idiot—especially an idiot who couldn't even block a hit when she was going easy.

Yet while the mother's evaluation of her daughter's partner was over, now she had to confirm whether her daughter had the will to back up this decision.

"And because I'm your mother," Miss Corale went on, "I have to ask: you aren't just letting a cute boy string you along, are you?"

"Do you truly think I'd be so flimsy?" Margit asked back. "You must take me for some kind of fool."

The young huntress squinted her eyes. Her glare gleamed with animosity beyond what a child could muster for their parent. This wasn't a tantrum predicated on being belittled: her anger was that of someone whose beliefs had been trespassed upon, down to the innermost recesses of their heart.

All at once, I realized that in all our years together, we had never once put to words how we felt about each other. We'd played together so much that being with one another had become our default state and we'd sharpened our skills together; but above all else, I had relied on her a great deal.

School-educated and two years my senior, Margit had known much more about the world than I had in my early youth, and she'd gone out of her way to share that knowledge. She excelled in ways that I could never replicate, no matter how hard I tried, and that had seeded massive respect for her in me.

Yet I still didn't know why she'd taken a liking to me.

I had an extra lifetime of experiences and a blessing from a future-Buddha-esque-entity, but other than that, I was a normal guy. I was no more creative than the average two-bit commoner, and my dreams for the future were so childish that they were literal fairy tales.

Only now did I realize that I didn't have any concrete reason for why she'd come with me. I know it was strange to ponder this *after* all but proposing, but

what was I to her beyond being the little boy in the neighborhood?

“I’m not taking you for a fool, nor am I looking down on you. But what I wanted to question wasn’t your feelings for him, but your resolution for life. We will be family forever, but once you set off as an adventurer, you won’t ever be a part of this household again. Do you understand that?”

“...Of course I do.”

For a split second, Margit’s brow pulled up.

This world lacked the bounty and social welfare of my last, meaning that doting parents still couldn’t afford to coddle their own children. Kicking back at home while trying to hit it big as a musician or mangaka was a fantasy, even by noble standards. Everyone had to earn their keep. Dependents weren’t tax exemptions, but tax liabilities. Forget being a shut-in, simply returning home after leaving the nest was an unwelcome affair.

My father had only been able—more precisely, been *forced*—to give up the mercenary life for his family’s farm because my uncle had passed away young. These were the sorts of extenuating circumstances that had to be accepted back once one put their hometown behind them.

I’m sorry; I messed up; I want to take up the family trade after all—such were impossible requests. By the time a departee returned, their family was usually rearing their replacement, even if that meant adopting a child.

“Then the house will go to your sister,” Miss Corale said.

“That’s perfectly fine by me,” Margit replied. “I may come to visit as family, but I won’t come to be spoiled as a child.”

The mother and daughter stared into one another’s eyes for minutes on end. I could hardly breathe with all the tension in the air. Between the freedom of a fourth-born son and the expectations laid upon an eldest daughter was a vast chasm; it felt as if that difference had become a thick smog weighing down my lungs.

“And a huntress never goes back on her word?”

“You *must* be looking down on me to ask me that, Mother. Even should I fall

lifeless on a desolate road, I will be content so long as the corpse of my chosen is beside me. How is that for resolve?”

The path of an adventurer was not for the faint of heart. I’d only managed on my way home because I had the means to protect myself. Some of those issues had been caused by my rotten luck, but an average person could still expect proportional misfortune. Laying on the side of a road with one’s skull exposed to the open air was, in truth, a merciful end. There were plenty of fates worse than death.

Margit knew what could await: if the day came when we didn’t have what it took, we could very well be subjected to the worst the world had to offer. Yet she’d made up her mind all the same.

If you asked me whether I could forgo hatred and vengeance in my final moment to use the last of my breath for Margit, I would answer yes in a heartbeat. Her glare, directed straight into her mother’s eyes, was a wordless declaration that she was ready to do the same.

To be cherished so dearly tightened up my chest and lit a fire below. I’d grown accustomed to the heart-pounding thrill of facing battle-lust, but I was unimmunized to this emotion. *Is this...death by wholesome?!*

“Hm,” Miss Corale said. “Very well. I’ll allow it. If you’d said something as trite as ‘I won’t regret it,’ or anything else that even takes into account your inheritance, I would have beaten the sense back into you. But it seems your determination is real.”

“Mother...”

As the daughter tried to process her emotions, the mother smiled a gentle smile and leaned forward to pat the girl on the head. It was as if she were caressing a baby. No matter how old the little arachne got, she would always be her mother’s child.

“When did you grow to be such a splendid huntsman? Listen well: never let your prey escape. Once you sink in your fangs, make it yours forevermore.”

“I don’t need you to tell me that.”

“Hehe, look at you being all cheeky.”

Miss Corale ran through her daughter's hair so thoroughly that Margit's head tilted to one side and her pigtails came loose. Yet she didn't resist one bit. There was something between them that I couldn't see—something that must've made her mother's palm feel warm and gentle. Of course she wouldn't put up a fight.

Being patted on the head was a heartwarming thing. I'd forgotten all about it as an adult, but it had all come flooding back now that I was a child again: the joy of being accepted, the happiness of being worried about, and the gentle warmth of a loving hand.

It was a beautiful scene. So much so that I almost felt bad for sitting in on it.

"By the way, when will I be getting my first grandchild?"

"*Mother!*"

But it came crashing down all too quickly. Oh, the irony: the woman who'd created this precious moment had destroyed it with her own two hands.

[Tips] It is incredibly difficult to reclaim an inherited position after moving out of the home. Not only does one require the current head-of-household's signature, but they must endure distrust from other members of the community, who will be skeptical of why they have returned.

Blocking is one of the foundations of battle, but blocking alone cannot be the end of things. If it is, then that isn't defense—it's fleeing.

I caught an all-out attack with an angled shield, twisting as I thrust forward; not only did I stop my opponent's sword, but I sent it crashing into his own shield. Taking advantage of the opening I'd made, I lunged with my own blade to gently tap at the top of his inner thigh.

"There goes your main thigh artery."

As a key pivot point, this spot was impossible to fully armor, despite having a major artery running through it. One deep cut could cause enough blood loss to knock a man out after another breath or two, especially when his heart was pounding from the heat of combat.

Mensch could hope for a few extra minutes to wallow in their last moments, while smaller races would just die outright. Sturdier folk like dvergar or the beastlier demihumans might manage to mount one final offensive before they went down.

Defense and offense are two sides of the same coin: the wooden slab in my hand had enough mass to give me some real play in how I approached things.

Crying out like a hawk on the horizon, I cut off another foe. He had his sword to one side, and I stepped forward to intercept his approach. By squatting down and bringing my shield to bear in a rising diagonal arc, I managed to scoop up the edge of his shield with mine; naturally, I sent it in the direction he'd postured his weapon in, making sure he no longer had a course of attack.

All that remained was to sweep him off his exposed feet and bop him on the head with my sword.

"Right between the eyes."

As illustrated, the shield was a powerful ancillary to a fighter's main weapon. Not only did it divert the current of incoming danger, but it served to herald the approach of one's own deathblows. For a true master, it was just as dependable as a sword.

Another opponent approached, more cautiously this time. He slowly crept up while gauging our distance, so I crouched low and tackled my shield into his out of nowhere. His form crumbled, and I took the opportunity to trace the tip of my blade across his midsection.

"Your stomach, gone."

So long as I followed the seam of his armor, my weapon would cut true. Whether a blade could make it through the chain, underarmor, and flesh that waited below depended heavily on the user's skill, but it was a hell of a surer shot than trying to cut through that *and* the sturdy outer layer of leather. With the arc of this particular strike, his torso would no longer be able to hold back his innards and would no doubt pack the inside of his clothing with a stuffing of pure gore as he journeyed on to the heavens.

Another man tried to catch me by surprise with a shield bash of his own, but

he'd picked his angle of approach unwisely. There was a science to it all, and without its employ, I had no fear of being opened up. In fact, a half measure was more dangerous than doing nothing: I slid across the surface of his buckler to smack his head in cross-counter fashion.

"Skull smashed."

Rimmed with metal and built of solid wood, a shield was more than enough to crack someone's head wide open. A crushed brain suffered no thoughts. Whether they died instantly or not was irrelevant—flooded with excess blood, their head wouldn't be in any condition to issue commands to the rest of the body. From there, it was a more trivial affair than quartering a pig strung up for slaughter.

Ah, but of course, one can never forget about the simple beauty of just shoving an enemy. One more came at me, so I pushed him into one of his friends. Nothing was quite as juicy as getting a foe to block for you *and* whittling away at their numbers at once.

"Grah!"

"Whoa?! Sorry, Kurst!"

Ooh, ouch. That one's gonna sting deep in the shoulder. He hadn't broken a bone, but the poor guy would probably struggle to bring his arm up higher than a ninety degree angle for the foreseeable future.

But the fellow lowering his guard because he accidentally slashed your friend wouldn't fly; the correct answer was to redouble his efforts against me and make up for his misstep with a vengeance. Chaotic brawls were the natural endpoint of battle, and this sort of minor misfortune was a given among mercenary circles.

I slid the flat of my blade over the edge of this unready fool's shield to gently glide across his neck.

"Jugular severed."

I had no need to explain how lethal a strike this was. The bloodways fueling the brain had tremendous throughput, and once busted open, they spewed into the open air with enough force to generate red mist. A loss in blood pressure

became a loss in consciousness, which then became an eternal slumber. Even ogres—leaps and bounds more robust than any mensch—had no recourse once their heads were gone; this weakness was one to make note of.

I'd already used a shield on my way home, but boy was I getting to like it. It was perfect for a one-handed swordsman like me.

Blocking was a Dexterous endeavor, perfect to abuse with Enchanting Artistry. But while that alone gave me more mileage than I could expect to see otherwise, I'd also taken six levels' worth of Shield Mastery. Add to that some specializations in Parrying and Shield Bashes, and I had a delightful little build where the attacker could expect to do zero damage and die for the trouble.

Though I couldn't exactly say I'd gotten a worthwhile rate of return, my year of toil had, if nothing else, given me a lot of experience points to play with—that, and the episodes on my way home.

Evading hot-blooded foes, kicking them down, cutting them up, and throwing in a shield bash when it struck my fancy—this was how I'd spent the past thirty minutes. Half an hour of this was quite the workout: I was hot, sweaty, and could feel the high of adrenaline starting to approach its peak...

"All right," the captain barked. "That's enough."

...but I guess I couldn't keep going if there were no more foes to fight.

"Thank you very much for the bout," I said with a bow.

In unison, the Konigstuhl watchmen on the ground returned my pleasantry in voices that sounded like groans from hell.

I doubted I had to elaborate that this hadn't been a real battle. Although my selection of mortal weak points may have painted the picture of this snowy plain dyed crimson, the truth was that we'd been sparring with wooden swords and training shields.

Being as free as I was, I'd taken the chance to join in on a Watch drill, only for Sir Lambert to get a funny idea in his head. "Since you're here and all," he'd said, "why don't you give the boys a taste of what they serve in the capital?"

So started my melee against the entirety of the Konigstuhl Watch. Our

hometown sparring sessions were structured like freeplay machines at arcades: you could continue past a game over as many times as you wanted to so long as you had the will. Hellbent on taking a point, my old compatriots had gotten up again and again and again; it had been an exhausting bout, considering how little I'd invested into Stamina.

At first, my old seniors had been eager to show me up, and my new juniors—the boys who were still in the selection process—had been excited to test themselves against their rumored predecessor. But once they'd begun losing, they started to hound me with dogged desperation. By the end of the session, every single one of them had been so desperate that they were ready to work themselves into the dirt if it meant scoring a hit.

Man, could I sympathize with the poor soldiers who had to fight defenders in a siege. Once backed into a corner—whether physical or mental—people could muster an infinite surge of motivation. The Empire's policies against undue slaughter and looting were probably in place because the powers that be didn't want to deal with enemies like this.

"Wonderful. You're good. Here I thought you might rust under a noble, but it looks like you've only gotten sharper." As I wiped down my sweat, the font of mayhem we called a captain leisurely clapped at my performance.

No skin off my back, though. Everyone here had the fundamentals down, so this scuffle made for a good bit of exercise. I was sure Sir Lambert had pegged my strength at a glance and determined that a one-versus-all fight wouldn't put me in danger.

Or rather, he'd probably realized that I wouldn't be able to let loose all my spare energy otherwise.

"I'll have you know that I didn't exactly spend my days in Berylin taking it easy, Captain."

"Sure, but as an indentured servant? I figured you'd have been too busy with your chores to keep up your chops. But looking at you now...what kind of hell have you been through?"

His sunken eyes were as menacing as ever, but there was a curious twinkle in them now. In a tremendously good mood, he grinned from ear to ear.

Come to think of it, he was right. How many times had I nearly died since leaving home? No normal servant ought to have experienced as many near-death...hey, wait! A normal servant shouldn't be nearly dying at *all*.

"That's confidential," I said. "You'll have to let me off on that one."

"Ha ha ha! Figures! But you look like you know your way around a shield better than you do silver spoons and lacquerware. Can you blame me for being curious?"

Laughing heartily, Sir Lambert walked around with a pail of water and splashed scoops of the stuff onto his fallen men. It was meant to shock them awake while also helping them rehydrate, but *man* was it a rough time in the winter. Seeing him do so with a big smile was enough to confirm he was as terrifying as ever.

"Well, there was...a lot that happened."

I'd spent a lot of time with just a sword, and I'd been worried for a while that it would take me a long time to get used to using a shield. Thankfully, that hadn't been the case. Small bucklers didn't get in the way, and were made specifically to take advantage of a user's Dexterity, as opposed to larger ones that relied on Endurance or Strength.

Better still, my mystic catalyst was a ring, so I didn't need to keep my left hand free in order to cast spells. Covering it up with a shield just played into the surprise factor when I switched from being a basic swordsman to weaving in magic. My old boss really did have a good head on her shoulders.

Actually, in hindsight, Lady Agrippina had been quite the data cruncher herself. With the way she analyzed information, I bet she would've been an incredible munchkin had we ever gotten the chance to roll dice at a shared table; no doubt we'd both recoil at how unsavory the other's build would be.

What a pity. If only someone could invent TRPGs here, we could put her talents to use. For all her grumbling about how she hated people, she had a soft spot for the people she let into her life; if we had a usual crew, surely she'd make for a great GM...

My meandering train of thought was pulled back into reality by a sudden

sensation of hostility. I jumped back, whirling around to face the source, only to find that our captain had brought out his own wooden sword.

Holy shit... It wasn't as if he'd actually attacked me while I wasn't looking. He'd just gotten *ready* to fight, and that was enough to make me want to turn tail—what kind of crazy build did he have, anyway?! How was an average soldier supposed to do anything while debuffed by his intimidating aura?

A perilous gleam flickered in his menacing eyes. He had a look only a career soldier could project: rent flesh and spilt blood were how he bought his next meal, and his gaze betrayed a hunger tempered only by rational thought.

His form was just as I remembered: a long two-handed sword in his right hand with the blade resting on his shoulder. Despite basically standing upright, he didn't have any openings to note.

Palm up and pulling toward himself, he beckoned me with two short waves of his left hand—the imperial classic. This was about as overt an invitation to throw down as one could find in all the lands.

Fair enough. I didn't know if I'd live up to his expectations, but I was up for the challenge.

Zweihanders were a weapon reserved for literal professionals. Nearly as long as its wielder, the tremendous weight and unwieldiness meant it was a liability to oneself and their allies in the hands of an amateur.

However, in adept hands, it boasted finer control than a spear, as well as the option to cut through polearm shafts with overwhelming strength. Draftees across the world feared the mercenaries of the Empire: a conscripted soldier's only redeeming quality was the number of his peers, and Rhinian mercs were infamous for turning untrained enemies into clouds of guts skirring across seas of blood. The zweihander was their trademark weapon, perfectly tuned for the chaos of a battlefield.

But their awesome might and skill with the blade were not the only reasons our nation's mercenaries struck fear in their enemies. Most of all, it was because the style required the user to put his life on the line, and they always did without a second thought.

They threw themselves into lines of spears with nothing but a sword. They broke into enemy ranks, cutting down the myriad of deadly attacks trying to stop them. Naturally, many failed to parry *every* attack and lost their lives because of that, but without fail, they marched straight into the lion's jaws to bring the battle into a chaotic melee that only the most seasoned could navigate.

Theirs was not the courage of brutes; it was that of heroes, willing to put their life on the line to unlock peerless prowess.

Those were the sorts of hellish landscapes a mercenary endured...and yet Sir Lambert had managed to grow old enough to *retire*. Pair with that how he'd been directly invited to serve under a noble, and it was plain as day to see how monstrous he really was.

I put up my shield and dashed to the right; being right-handed, it was harder to put power into my offensive if the enemy was on that side. Keeping my blade dangling low, I aimed for a stab: if I could hop into an uncomfortably close range, I could make use of my smaller frame and steal a knee or ankle hit that would knock him out of commission.

But, evidently, my choice of action very much struck Sir Lambert's fancy, because...he gripped his sword's handle with *two* hands.

In all my life, I'd pretty much only seen him carelessly swing with one hand. His weapons were heavy enough that I used to think they were purely ceremonial, and yet he managed feats like cutting the wick off a burning candle *single*-handed. If a guy like him was using both his hands, what do you think would happen?

"Whoa?!"

This. This is what would happen.

A slantwise slash split the air and came at me with such speed that I couldn't track it with my eyes. Coming down on me from above, he threatened to crush me flat. I intercepted with my shield, just barely managing to adjust the angle so I wouldn't be sandwiched between his sword and the ground. Though I jumped back to alleviate the pressure, the force of impact made it seem more like I was being blown away.

What a blow. Had he used a real sword, that strike could've cleaved straight through any armor in its way to chop at flesh. It wasn't *just* brute force either: his ludicrous strength was being guided by intellect. Anyone who couldn't match his skill would be run over without so much as a chance to roll for reaction.

The famous saying went that it was best to be water, to not be rigid. Yet here stood a man whose rigidity could cut through even the formlessness of water. Sir Lambert's strength wasn't predicated solely on impeccable swordsmanship, but came as a holistic package. Behind the scenes, I suspected he had traits that gave him a sturdier frame, thus increasing his overall firepower. I knew I already had it good, but oh, what I would give to peek at other people's builds.

"What's wrong? Already done?"

"...As if!"

Well, I guess asking for anything else would just come back to bite me. Expelling the thought, I amped myself up and reentered close quarters.

The captain's tip-heavy blade made for rapid swings, and he was deft enough to cover a lot of space without opening himself up. Pinpoint attacks aiming for the edge of my shield—as opposed to its face—particularly vexed me as he tried to peel away my defenses; his wherewithal to kick away my quick counters to cover his few openings was beyond annoying.

To be fair, I was evading his attacks too, and purposefully positioned myself in ways that made it hard for him to turn into his swings, so I may have been just as obnoxious on his end. But being locked in a flurry of attacks where a single missed perception check could mean eating an unblockable hit was not very conducive to my mental health goals.

Weary of weathering the storm of steel, I made some space between us—only to unconsciously sense something coming right toward my face.

Had I not brought up my shield on instinct, I would have lost then and there. A stinging shock assaulted my left forearm as the rock I'd batted away shattered into pieces.

He'd launched a stone at me. As soon as he recognized that I'd left his range

of attack, he'd dug his sword into the ground to fling a rock my way, the bastard!

Stone throwing was one of the few long-range options a fighter had, but I'd never seen it employed so seamlessly. Not only had the captain kept his form similar to a regular swing to ambiguate his intentions, but he'd launched the rock with enough force to make my arm go numb. If a backline mage ate one of these, they would certainly die.

It only made sense: at war, there were always going to be mages trying to apply the principle of death at first sight. Any warrior who'd racked up a history of successful battles was sure to have a means of dealing with the enemy's pesky rear guard.

Barring few exceptions, the range of any spell was limited by the caster's view of the field. Firing off a big area-of-effect with blatant disregard for life was one thing, but anyone trying to avoid hitting their allies would need to be able to have clear sight of their foes.

The Trialist Empire and its mercenaries were famous for plunging the front lines into pandemonium and then excelling amidst the discord. A middling mage would struggle to find opportunities to cast spells without fear of friendly fire; if they had the courage to get closer, that would be when Sir Lambert would blast them with a rock.

It was the perfect way to pick off the backline. Judging from how accurately he'd aimed for my face, he could probably land the mark with ease so long as nobody cut off his line of fire; with how hard the impact had been on my shield, an average spellcaster's barrier would do no more than slow it down. Even lightly tossed, being hit by a stone would break their focus and interrupt whatever spell they were preparing. If it broke a nose or something, then they'd be in too much pain to concentrate on weaving any more.

You're a sly old fox, you know that? Evidently, the veteran had a way of dealing with anything that might crop up on a battlefield.

"Good save!" Sir Lambert exclaimed in good humor. "Well, then. Let me get a little serious!"

I knew he hadn't been giving it his all, but was he actually going to push me

any harder for a *training* duel?!

My surprise was cut short when his sword vanished.

No, wait. It didn't disappear... It's just out of view!

Letting my sixth sense take the wheel, I raised my sword; an invisible strike came zooming toward my face. Upon making contact, I jumped with the momentum to earn myself space.

Churning my dizzied mind, I reevaluated the situation. He hadn't magically poofed away his weapon; the effect was achieved through pure skill. He must've read my blind spot from the movements of my eyes and planted his attack right where I wouldn't see it.

Mensch—or rather, any race that shared our eyes—were invariably burdened with a terrible flaw. A small patch of our retinas lacked photoreceptors, thus creating a blind spot. Although the brain automatically made our vision seem whole, there was a slice of space about fifteen degrees temporally and three degrees below the horizontal in which the image we saw was unreal filler. In essence, there was a piddling five degrees of vision where we couldn't see what was right in front of us...and he'd thrust his sword squarely in that region.

"Not bad," he whistled. "Can't believe you parried that!"

"How the hell...are you still *talking?!*"

Held toward an eye, even a massive sword only appeared as large as it was thick. No matter how small my blind spot was, a blade fit comfortably inside. Being able to watch my eyes in the thick of combat and perfectly aim his sword with all his usual speed and power was straight out of a stunt book. I'd been getting a little full of myself now that I had Scale IX swordplay, but facing *this* was enough to knock me down a peg.

"C'mon," he barked, "block it properly! Even with a wooden sword..."

"...your attacks are strong enough to break my skull open! I know—would it kill you to *hold back*?!"

"You're one to talk, Erich! Your parries would break my fingers if I didn't have a solid grip, so fair's fair!"

Argh! To make matters worse, his sight-reading skills weren't just for his own attacks: he kept shifting around to make it harder for me to focus on his weak points!

Had I lacked the Insight to broadly perceive the whole of his form at once, I wouldn't have been able to deal with it at all. Some poor mage trying to get a lock on him in a warzone never would've stood a chance. Magia could weave extra targeting spells to automate their attack spells, but the kinds of normal sorcerers found in military skirmishes almost always had to aim manually. Besides, tracking spells were difficult and costly; those who *could* use them would try not to unless there was a mounted enemy who they absolutely needed to hit.

The man knew his stuff. Offensive magecraft was predicated on delivering incomprehensible death at first sight, and the other side of that coin was the grave danger that followed if the first strike wasn't lethal. Sir Lambert had the ability to both dodge the initial blast and return the favor with something just as deadly—he was a certified witch-breaker. How many spellcasters had had their spirits broken by this walking maelstrom of violence?

What a monster... Seriously, why the hell are you running a canton watch out in the middle of nowhere?

"Haah, ahh, ugh..."

Damn, I'm running out of juice. Part of my exhaustion was thanks to the multi-man melee with the other watchmen, but the brunt of it was from the absolute focus I needed to keep up with someone of Sir Lambert's level. For a squishy guy like me, every single exchange whittled at my mental fortitude, meaning a battle of attrition put me at a heavy disadvantage.

But this was so much *fun*. It was awesome! As someone who'd spent my whole life building up my own strength, facing off against someone who could really turn a fight into anyone's game wound me *right* up. Trampling the strong with the stronger was refreshing, to be sure, but there was nothing in the world like a fight where everything rode on the final roll of the dice!

It was a true shame that these were wooden swords. If only he had his real weapon—what sort of hideous beast would I get to face then?

I was sure he'd have what it took to fend off a fleet of Unseen Hands equipped with swords. The gear he'd looted over the years had to include some kind of counterplay against magic. And what of his men? In tandem with a commander like him, what kind of absurd challenge would they provide?

How I loathed this fragile body of mine. I would have liked to keep going forever, but alas. I had no intention of losing, so it was time to force the end.

After sliding a diagonal slash across the face of my shield, I stepped into range and thrust my blade at his face. He jerked his neck to one side and countered in fractions of a second by trying to knee me with the tree trunks he called legs. I dodged by a hair's breadth and rolled back to avoid the follow-up he made with his sword.

I leapt to my feet and blocked another sideways slash...only to be met with the earsplitting sound of my shield being reduced to wood chips.

"Wha?!"

Simple as they were, these shields were well made, boasting an arched design and metal rims. They were more than enough to use in conjunction with wooden swords, but it seemed that rule failed to hold true after soaking up dozens of attacks from Sir Lambert.

Dammit! We were just getting to the good part!

"Gh..."

On the captain's end, his weapon had also given out. Maybe a blunted metal sword could've handled his strength, but a wooden one just couldn't cut it. I had to admit, though: I would be very pleased if any of that was due to my skill and not his brute strength.

"Ah?! The captain broke another one!"

"Oh, crap! The smith's gonna chew us out again!"

"C'mon, Captain! How many does that make?!"

"Wha—*me?!* It's not *my* fault!"

With the Watch mired in budgetary concerns, the watchmen's cries signaled the end of our match. Saved by the jeers of those who'd recovered enough to

sit up and watch, I shook out my left arm and breathed a sigh of relief.

[Tips] Canton watches receive stipends from their magistrate, but they usually aren’t all too hefty. Many watches are supported in part by the canton they serve.

As he watched the melee unfold, Lambert found himself in a good mood—perhaps his best in months.

Many tryout sessions ago, one boy had gotten up among the crowd of bawling brats. Built like a dainty little girl, the runt of the litter had gotten up again and again, until at last he'd even picked up a stone to try and defend himself. Lambert remembered the scene well.

Talent was a fickle thing. Who would have guessed that those delicate fingers, all but made to carve wooden statuettes, would be so at home around the handle of a sword?

The Konigstuhl Watch was well-trained—so much so that its captain was convinced they'd hold their own against his old mercenary crew. In a full-on skirmish, he had confidence they'd be able to soundly win against any enemy so long as they were only marginally outnumbered. That, to him, was enough to feel satisfied as an instructor.

Yet Erich had always been cut from a different cloth. He soaked in new teachings as a rainless field did water, blooming into a teeming flower patch each time. He'd cultivated his own unshakeable logic as he studied the near-barbaric hybrid sword arts, to a degree hardly even seen among Lambert's old crew.

Such was the boy's propensity for the craft that Lambert had tutored him personally, rather than casting him with the rest of his men. A thorough defeat at the hands of a ten-year-old boy was enough to shatter the toughest of egos.

Before so much as setting foot outside the canton, the boy had been strong. Jealous onlookers would grumble that it was talent at work, but there was a level of strength unattainable by mere talent: the mercenaries and knights who'd survived repeat scuffles with Lambert were prime examples. Some individuals shone amidst their peers, and then further led them to glory: every so often, the world simply produced a character that was unreasonably strong.

Lambert knew, not as a point of pride but one of fact, that he was one such individual. He was a blood-tested champion who'd rallied men against armies twice their size and won. His enemies had planned foolproof stratagems that had all but laid victory in their hands; what else could he be to them if not an

affront to reason?

The young man who'd returned from the capital was another such example.

Lambert was proud of his hardened crew of veterans; the younger among them would only need a bit longer to join their ranks; and the boys in training weren't good, but they had gusto. Altogether, he'd drilled them into one contiguous mass of military might.

Yet here was his pride and joy being tossed around like a plaything. Today's spar focused on the chaos of a melee, meaning that they didn't have the spears and bows to put their numbers to proper use; still, one would expect a *single* sword to at least *graze their target*. This was a practice match where they weren't even allowed to participate: watching them eat hits to the vitals without any fight at all was downright comical.

Perhaps the biggest joke of all was that Erich *still* seemed comfortable. That was the calm carriage of someone who still had a trick or two up his sleeve. He likely had some means of breaking through if his opponents ever managed to surround him.

Eventually, his men could go on no longer, and Lambert's curiosity grew too large to contain. Weapon in hand, he beckoned the young swordsman on; despite just having run amok in an exhausting one-on-many fight, Erich responded with enthusiasm.

Today's opponent was not someone Lambert could flatten with a half-hearted swing of his blade. For the first time in ages, he placed a second hand on his sword: this was not a spar meant to instruct, but a duel meant to crush.

Yet Erich did not fall. Lambert had swung with pinpoint precision—an unblockable attack that would crush the boy between blade and earth. But with an ingenious angle of his shield, Erich had managed to jump back in the nick of time and use the momentum to build space.

Quick thinking, Lambert noted. The kid had a good head on his shoulders tying together his overall technique.

How long had it been since he'd last done this? The captain's smile twisted into a wicked grin as he prepared to go all out.

Controlling his blade with polished mastery, the man took ruthless aim at Erich's vitals—if the boy didn't dodge, that was his problem. This wooden replica wasn't quite the same as Lambert's trusty zweihander, but that was fair enough; Erich wasn't used to his weapon either.

The boy was no disappointment: unwilling to allow a hit after a mere handful of exchanges, he parried with gratifying precision. Attacks that would inevitably tear down a thoughtless fighter came thundering down one after another, but he dealt with each one in a display of peerless elegance.

He's grown up to be a good swordsman, Lambert marveled.

Men were creatures of talent: one's greatest strength was sure to be another's direst weakness. All too many of them began their training without taking this lesson to heart. How many boys had Lambert seen take to massive weapons carried only by the brawniest of men, only to discover that the heftiest of arms chose their wielders with great scrutiny? Skill alone could not compensate for the physical necessities of mass, and a disheartening number of prospective fighters ruined their potential by walking paths unfit for them.

But Erich had found his calling. Though he was still growing, it was evident that he wouldn't be a big man by any metric; as such, he was best off striking a balance between speed and weight.

The transcendental detail was that he hadn't merely given himself to natural disposition: his style had a twist unique to himself. Always dancing just out of reach—or in reach, but in a spot that wouldn't allow for a full swing—quickly grated on the nerves of any foe. In spite of that, he used the relative shortness of his blade to facilitate strong offensives even when he was in tight quarters.

The kid makes for an annoying opponent, Lambert thought. *Then how about I test him?*

The captain began unveiling his secret techniques—ones which he'd developed by feel over years on the battlefield and hadn't once shared with his watchmen—but to no avail. He slung a rock lodged in the dirt at the boy; he slipped into his blind spot. These tricks had won him the heads of skilled enemy soldiers, their faces permanently warped in surprise.

But Erich kept up. Seeing through these surprises couldn't just be a matter of

talent or skill. The only thing that could take a warrior to the next level was *instinct*, and the only thing to hone instinct was raw experience.

The experience needed to sense murderous intent and keep it at bay with snap reactions could only be earned on the bloodiest of battlefields. It was an indescribable thing that seeped deep into one's body.

Three short years. How had he been blessed with so much violence in that time? As ashamed as he was to admit it, Lambert couldn't help but envy the boy. The opportunities for a warrior's mettle to be tested were few and far between—treasures to be unearthed.

Oftentimes, a tour of war would only bring trifling opponents. Boring enemies could become coin, of course, but they would never sate the ambition of those who sought the summit. That his protégé had gotten so lucky in such a short span filled Lambert to the brim with envy.

If I had gotten those same opportunities, how high could I have climbed?

Whether the self-scorn had gotten to him or not, Lambert decided to step into Erich's range. Punching or kicking a man down to open him up for a fatal slash was one of the old merc's favorite tricks. Every part of the body was a weapon, and mastery of them all was the mark of a professional, after all.

Kicking the boy off balance, Lambert forced an interaction where the next strike couldn't be dodged or blocked. He brought his blade down slantwise from above, making it as hard as possible to parry.

Okay. Show me what you've got.

After a brief moment of recoil, Erich caught the attack not with the face of his shield, but just on its edge, letting the sword glide across its surface. While it would've been easier for him to put his weight on the blade to pin it down after initial contact, he'd made the smart call to avoid any potential follow-ups below the belt.

Sending the strike back up at an angle, though, was tremendously difficult. He would need exact control of his core and an immaculately gentle touch, or he'd be crushed, shield and all—Erich had both.

That the shield splintered into pieces was an unfortunate inevitability. The

watchmen manhandled the thing every day in their training exercises, and it wasn't exactly the highest quality equipment to begin with. Rather, it was a miracle he'd been able to deflect such monstrous blows at all.

In his mind, Lambert sighed in awe. He'd positioned such that his lethal strike could be instantly followed up with another from the side, but the blade in the corner of his eye told him that wouldn't be happening.

The captain's wooden sword had bent out of shape from being knocked away. Made of refuse lumber, it was as shoddy as the shield...but this wasn't the work of the man's ludicrous strength. No, it was the result of an absolutely perfect parry.

Embarrassing as it was for a grown man of his age, the veteran mercenary was bitter. Being stopped by a fifteen-year-old kid when he was giving it his all left an unwelcome aftertaste in his mouth. A stinging thought simply wouldn't leave the back of his mind: *How strong was I back when I was his age?*

That, and also how he'd wrecked another piece of equipment.

"Ah?! The captain broke another one!"

"Oh, crap! The smith's gonna chew us out again!"

"C'mon, Captain! How many does that make?!"

Neither of the two could continue fighting. Lambert turned back to bark at his men, swallowing the impossible urge to one day face the boy in a real fight.

[Tips] Earning their bread through battle, mercenaries in the Trialist Empire are soldiers in all but name. Specialized in joint operations—particularly those held in messy and confusing conflicts—they are well known for their strength and organization. Farmhand draftees are only useful in battle when in formation with a spear, and Rhinian mercs excel at breaking down the structure of combat.

However, earning their bread through battle also means they are unlikely to accept bad odds or long, drawn out sieges. Not only does this pose a logistical challenge for strategizing generals, but it comes with great risk: send them to a losing fight, and who knows how their loyalties might shift?

Prices often vary between the city and countryside, but me and my Earthling sensibilities can't seem to get over how the *rural* side gets higher prices.

I supposed it should've been obvious considering how both the manufacturers and distributors were based in urban areas. Take a simple plank of wood: their price depended on the scope of local forestry industries, the scale of nearby manufacturing plants, and the number of merchants ferrying goods around. All these factors were tailored to meet demand, so it was only natural that the countryside would see its higher costs factored into the final price.

Ugh, I should've bought up more stuff in the capital. How was I supposed to know it'd cost twice *as much here?*

On this sunny winter afternoon, I found myself hauling overpriced wooden planks into the stable; I didn't want to get wood chips all over my family home, of course. Today's arsenal included not only my trusty whittling set, but also a catalog of carpentry tools and a special bottle of ink.

I still couldn't get over the price: I hadn't really gotten the opportunity to buy stuff as a kid, but it shocked me to think that everything other than food cost far more here than the city. All the worker's associations in Berylin—and the thaumalogical advancements shared by the College—had gotten me used to much more palatable prices. At this rate, I was going to have a hell of a time trying to find catalysts for my spells.

Expenses aside, at least I'd found what I needed. Giving up was a skill, and it was time to let go of my yearning for one-click delivery. I needed to clear my head and just be happy that I could trade for everything with money in the first place.

I sketched an outline onto the slabs of timber with a piece of charcoal. Once satisfied, I picked up my carving knife...

"Boo."

"Eep?!"

...and promptly dropped it when a breath tickled my ear.

Whirling around with a hand on my ear, I found Margit looking at me with a mischievous smile. *Dammit, that marks another loss for me...*

“Thank you kindly for the adorable reaction.”

“Hey, that’s dangerous. I could’ve hurt myself in a panic.”

“Why do you think I surprised you *before* you began working?”

Between the lines was the news that she’d been watching me for a while now. Man, builds specced for racial bonuses were so unfair. All we mensch got was a clumsy, frail body with two eyes that only worked in substantial light.

In contrast, jumping spider arachne had night vision good enough to see in pitch darkness; forget balancing on uneven ground, she could cling to vertical walls and even ceilings; and no matter how high up she was, she could slow her fall with a well placed thread of silk. Being one of the lowliest rungs on the humanfolk ladder, any one of these traits was enough to make me green with envy.

I supposed I could begrudgingly make do since I had one such arachne on my side. Margit alone sufficed to ward off the danger of an ambush, so it wouldn’t make much sense for me to invest in her role.

Magic that let mensch exceed the bounds of species was as expensive as it was difficult, not to mention the abundance of side effects. If I could get away with delegating something to a party member, I was best off doing so. As much fun as it would be to be adept at everything, any build that had me questioning whether my experience points were being put to good use wasn’t one for me.

“And?” Margit asked. “What exactly are you building? This is a rather grand design to be a mere piece of furniture.”

“Just a little something,” I answered.

My experience points had better uses. This box I was making was a catalyst for my new Matter Transmission spell—that’s right, I’d brought up my space-bending magic to Scale IV.

I’d touched on how expensive the madam’s specialty was in the past, but I’d been *shaking* upon confirming the investment. A year’s worth of experience

boosted by Limelit—which ended up being more than I'd anticipated, though I didn't understand why—had vanished, along with everything I'd earned on my journey home. After all that, I could finally move inanimate objects through spacetime.

But even *then*, I had some major restrictions. I could only transport things that were small and light enough to carry in one hand, one at a time, and most restrictive of all, I could only open portals to set locations. This was an achievement considering the level of transport available in this world, but still.

Personally, I had a theory that the steep costs associated with space-bending magic were put in place by the gods Themselves. The proliferation of transport and communications technology was sure to push civilization forward by leaps and bounds; it felt as though the world itself had put in a failsafe to make sure that it wouldn't see undue advancement.

If true, then the plan had worked: Lady Agrippina had claimed that the practitioners of the craft grew fewer in number with every passing generation. Everyone who studied magecraft knew it to be the pinnacle of convenience, but there was simply too much to learn—too many barriers to free usage. Most simply gave up on the field entirely.

I simply couldn't think of any other explanation as to why the future Buddha's incredibly lenient blessing would be so stingy here. Just getting to Scale III had cost me as much as *maxing out* Hybrid Sword Arts. This had to be the universe itself trying to limit the ways in which it could be fundamentally broken.

Not that I couldn't relate: wanting to limit things on the level of space-bending magic made sense for anyone trying to build a cohesive world. Every GM has had a moment where they've thought to themselves, *Oh, wait. This spell totally invalidates the whole story.* I'd seen mind-readers break whodunnits and teleporters whisk clients safely from one town to another, all while skipping the campaign's worth of story beats that had been planned for the road there... I'd left open a lot of holes in my early campaigns.

So this was how it had to be. A world that worked against the GM was sure to crumble eventually. Unfortunately.

Getting back to the actual space-bending, I'd successfully managed to move

matter through a wormhole—though that, too, had been quite a challenge. Boring out an extra-dimensional hole in the fabric of reality with raw mana was, to put it lightly, hard. Making a sub-nanometer thin slice of space reach into the back of spacetime was difficult enough; the arcane mathematics required to let physical matter pass through without deforming in terrible and irreversible ways was beyond complex. So intricate was the process that any living being adjusted to inhabit a piddling three dimensions would have their brain obliterated by the surreality in an instant.

All this to say, my great investment had only given me the ability to pass inanimate objects and spells through. I'd hesitated a lot even just to get to this point: the promise of adding to my arsenal of incomprehensible violence with Scale IV space-bending magic was good, but was it better than sitting on Scale III with a huge pile of experience for a rainy day?

As it turns out, my answer was yes: I wanted to let non-space-bending spells pass through my own portals.

This provided its own set of challenges. Lady Agrippna had made it look like an everyday affair, but weaving one spell in the midst of another was akin to shooting a bullet out of the air. It was all but physically impossible.

Weaving together complex formulae into one single system belonged to a dimension of its own. The scoundrel was a freak of nature for being able to casually improvise these sorts of spells, and my more ordinary capacities left me stuck barely cracking the threshold of convincing the universe to turn a blind eye.

But while the ability to send magic through a portal didn't sound as flashy as ferrying a whole person, there were some tricks to be played. I had some neat ideas I'd need to test out later.

The real downside was that, for all my investment, the magic was still woefully inefficient. I'd bolstered my overall mana capacity and I *still* risked running dry after a single poorly thought-out cast.

This box was going to solve that, though.

My arachne partner found herself a place to sit and cheer me on as I began whittling away along the charcoal outline. Once it was carved out, I took the

special flask of ink I'd readied in Berylin and coated the edges with its contents.

Mixed with all sorts of arcane drugs, the ink dried quickly, resisted decay, and was waterproof; but more importantly, it contained my blood, making it mystically significant when used as a catalyst.

By lining an enclosed space with magic circles drawn in this concoction, I could boost the precision and efficiency of my portals all at once. I'd built a chest about two sizes bigger than a coffin so I could pick out what I needed from inside with ease, and the catalyst would mean I could probably use it ten or so times a day without issue.

Basically, the most difficult part of the spell was trying to locate the point in space I wanted to make my portal in, and specifying that point in thaumaturgic terms. By limiting my target to a simple, marked box, I could cut corners on the most difficult part.

As an aside, this particular design had been given the green light by Lady Agrippina herself. She'd graced me with the oh-so-privileged impression of, "But why would you *need* to do such a thing?" but beggars can't be choosers. Though she'd remained skeptical of its necessity until the end, her assistance in the planning meant I was sure it wouldn't fail.

I carved out the inscriptions—only on the inside, since I didn't want it looking like a cursed chest—in about two hours' time. Just to test it out, I put the box together and threw some random branches inside.

"Hey, won't you tell me what it is you're making already?"

"It'll be easier to show you. Give me just another second."

I activated the spell. Unused to the disgusting feeling that accompanied large mana expenditures, I was hit with a wave of nausea that I had to swallow back. For a moment, my ring seemed to groan—until the blue gemstone wedged into it began to glow. I'd calculated things such that the lunar ring alone would suffice, but things were proceeding even more smoothly than I'd thought. It seemed Helga's memory was lending a hand.

Once upon a time, there had been a girl I had wished to help; though my attempts had proven futile, her wish to help me in turn took form within my

palm.

I'd grown used to the sight under the scoundrel, but looking closely, the tear in space was chill-inducing. All it had done was spit out a few sticks, but the instinctive and absolute realization that the metaphysical hole led to a land that could not be returned from struck me with fear.

If I was going to feel this distressed, I wouldn't be able to employ these in battle for the foreseeable future. I'd need to either improve my casting efficiency further or simply get used to the discomfort that came with mana expenditure.

"Goodness!"

Still, Margit's surprise helped improve my mood, and I opened the chest to prove that this was no sleight of hand: the branches were gone.

Honestly, that went without saying. Otherwise, it would've meant they'd somehow duplicated instead—now that would be a *real* glitch. Who knew how the world would react if I'd pulled that off?

"To think you can just...*do that*," Margit said in awe. "Magic truly is amazing."

"Right?" I bragged. "With this, we'll be able to travel without lugging around heavy and breakable stuff. Instead, we can just shut it away somewhere safe and call for it whenever we need it. Worst case, I can summon the whole container."

"In that case," she said, cocking her head, "can you summon me as well? This chest looks as though it'd fit a person or two. Would we be able to bring along anyone we'd wish on our travels?"

Ahh... Yeah, I should've known she'd go there.

Unfortunately, that wasn't feasible yet. Space-bending involved linking our reality with one totally different in physical make. Trying to transport something alive without accidentally delivering it in a *deceased* state was a much more complicated process.

Taking into account all the add-ons and the raw commitment to space-bending magic the task required, I could maybe have figured it out by now if I'd

dedicated every single point of experience I'd earned in my entire life to it...I *think*.

Ah well, that was just how it went. Teleporting *people* was a ticket to wrecking every campaign ever to have been written. I couldn't blame the universe for trying to keep things balanced to some degree: we GMs employed contrived anti-magic zones to achieve a similar effect all the time.

"I see magic has its own set of caveats," Margit said.

"I'm glad you understand. Lots of people tend to think that mages can do pretty much anything."

Thankfully, my childhood companion was of a reasonable mind. Magecraft was the art of convincing reality to be generous in its interpretation of physical laws; breaking them outright wasn't part of our repertoire. Nothing could not birth something: a crumb of bread couldn't become infinite loaves, nor could a fried fish be resurrected.

Yet for the layman, it certainly could be seen as a do-it-all field of study. Perhaps my master had been right to bid me hide my ability: being asked to do the impossible out of ignorance sounded like a nightmare.

"Thank goodness you're the one who's come up with this spell."

"Why's that?"

"Think about it. This means you can sneak anything into any city. *Anything*."

Margit's last word sent a shiver down my spine.

My old boss may have used these portals for the equivalent of picking up a television remote, but I couldn't let myself forget how unethical they were. These were a smuggler's ticket to peddle any illicit substance under the sun; they were a maximum-security prisoner's gateway to easy freedom.

No wonder the cranks of Polar Night were always working on their counterspells and anti-magic barriers. Smuggling was *cute* compared to the other terrible things space-bending facilitated. One could abduct national persons of interest and ferry them off to foreign lands in the blink of an eye. Or worse...what if someone could open a portal above an enemy capital and send

Great Work polemurgy in from afar?

The answer was that things would go to shit. It suddenly made so much sense why this alone would be enough to justify a professorship.

Margit and I looked at each other and made an oath: this box would be a secret that stayed between the two of us.

[Tips] The space-bending box is a wooden container made by Erich for the purpose of making his portals more cost-effective.

In my memory, slipping out of the house after dark was inextricably linked with a stop to the nearby convenience store. Feeling the cool night air and sinking my teeth into a cheap piece of fried chicken had a special place in my heart—knowing the snacks had been bad for me made them all the tastier.

Alas, I found myself far removed from the colorful glow of those neon signs; I slinked toward the forest as if chased off by the moon's light. The unhealthy grease-juice of flavorful karaage, the saccharine sweetness of milk coffee, and the sticks of tobacco I'd picked up later on in life were nowhere to be found.

Here was a world inhabited only by me, the round moon, and the steel instrument of power gripped tight in my hands.

I practiced the basic stances over and over again. As improvisational as the Hybrid Sword Arts were, the style still had form: a stance for parrying, one for pushing forward, another for baiting an easy counterhit... I conjured up opponents in my mind's eye as I swung to my heart's content.

The Konigstuhl Watch's training sessions made for great exercise, not to mention how the real possibility of death when facing Sir Lambert made it a great source of experience. Frankly, it was absurd how polished he was at his craft; I simply couldn't wrap my head around how a man on even ground with my Divine swordplay and Dexterity found himself back in this idyllic town.

Truth be told, I wasn't entirely confident I'd win if I challenged him to a serious fight with just the blade at my hip. I had a hunch that a true confrontation wouldn't come down to our raw stats, but rather a contest of

who had more cards up his sleeve...that, and whom fortune favored.

War was a callous realm where men's lives were whisked away like straw, proud knights fell to stray arrows, and the greatest of warriors vanished in the face of collateral mystic violence. That the captain had participated in serious military campaigns meant he must've come across real polemurgy during his career; the serendipity required to survive such an environment to the age of retirement was something I couldn't help but envy.

Yet to begrudge a bird begot not flight; jealousy would earn me no luck of my own. It wasn't like resentment at others' pulls had ever made my gacha rolls better.

So I would simply have to kill him with my own style—I wasn't going to let my magical talents just go to waste.

Warmed up from my practice routine, I began to rev my engines. Imagining a target a middling distance away, I chucked Schutzwolfe as hard as I could. Though she wouldn't fly as truly as a throwing knife, three kilograms of spinning steel would hurt whether I hit with the blade or the handle.

"*Eins.*"

Crutched up on an incantation and a snap of my fingers, I activated my magic. Reality tore, and the first of my pre-tagged swords—I hadn't bothered tagging Schutzwolfe since she was always on my person—appeared in my hand. Slightly longer than my main weapon, this blade was one I'd won from the bandits who'd ambushed me and Mika on our trip to Wustrow.

I summoned an Unseen Hand and caught the flying Schutzwolfe and wielded her from afar. Fueled by Independent Processing, my style was closer to summoning a second swordsman than it was to dual-wielding.

After going through a few more routines, I once again threw my sword at my imaginary enemy. Finishing off a cornered opponent by throwing one's weapon was a pinnacle of beauty and style.

"*Zwei.*"

One by one, I summoned more blades to the mix and kicked it into higher gear. Next came three, then four, as I rotated through a whole arsenal of

disposable weapons. Nameless though they were, the sturdy swords I'd won in battle over the years served me well: a hand-picked selection produced far better results than the impromptu variant of this combo I'd developed in the ichor maze.

I'd used it again when fending off Viscount Liplar's goons, but I still hadn't coined a name for it then. If I had to come up with something, I supposed "the Order" would be an apt title.

No matter how tightly I packed the blades together, they had free rein to strike without clanging together. Greater numbers had few weaknesses, but one of them was the risk of friendly fire; the unfairness of conquering that had been soundly proven at the Liplar estate, I felt. Anyone who managed to block the first attack would be assaulted by a second and third from ordinarily unimaginable angles. Aiming for these unavoidable weak points would be all the more disorienting for those who were experienced in normal combat.

Eventually, I reached my limit, having pulled enough swords out of the box to cap me out on Hands. Throwing the final blade, I reached into the empty air and called the accursed name in my mind; rousing from her slumber in an infernal plane, the sword came to me singing her twisted songs of love.

As her edge split the air, I was hit with cries of rapture—to be called was her purest joy. For the Craving Blade, nothing could compare to being sought as a weapon. Her unblemished black body was the same as ever, down to the chilling carvings of incomprehensible ancient letters. In peak condition, the metal's darkness seemed to soak in the light of the moon itself.

The thing had been badgering me this whole time. Hurry up and call for me if you need a sword, she'd said. Let me enjoy the sweet touch of your hand, she'd said.

So I obliged. As her full-throated songs of deranged love played on, I danced a waltz of blades. My body was but a machine to do battle, and this was where I was to test it; I held nothing back, ready to push myself to my absolute limit.

"Here it goes..."

It was time for my new technique's pilot run. Pulling swords out of thin air and throwing them around was mere setup—a practical application of my

abilities that let me unleash my full strength from the word go. Letting things end here would be such a waste.

Thus, my brand new idea.

All of my Hands threw their swords at the imagined target and dissipated. In their place, I mustered a new fleet to reach into a new portal: they grabbed dagger after dagger from the box on the other side and pelted the invented enemy with a barrage of knives. The attack came from every angle except straight down; even then, a Hand could maybe sneak up to strike from under someone.

I'd realized that if spells could pass through my portals, then they could also serve as nozzles for long-range attacks; this was just the simplest way to do so. Much like an infamous vampire—ignore the part where I couldn't stop time—I could blast my foes with a maelstrom of projectiles from every angle. Even the most battle-tested veterans would struggle to fend it off, and mages with half-hearted barriers were sure to crumble.

On that second point, I knew from experience that physical barriers had two potential weaknesses: a blow strong enough to break the whole thing at once, or a sporadic burst of attacks concentrated in a short time window. The masked nobleman's ludicrous sevenfold barrier had still failed when I began pounding with the back of my sword like I was splitting a pumpkin. Alternatively, I'd read about airbag-esque barriers that could pop themselves on impact, but they purportedly triggered on very weak stimuli. No matter what I ran into, a means of dishing out several small hits in quick succession would do me no harm.

Besides, this came with its own upside: used against a crowd of weaklings, this produced a lot of half-dead suckers.

Critical wounds that left victims too weak to make noise—not to mention those that outright killed them—were okay, but the groans of one's comrades suffering personally imaginable pain did wonders to snap morale.

On top of that, it solved the problem of my magic being unfit for urban areas.

I'd developed my mystic thermite to work off hedge magic in order to keep the mana costs low, but that meant it let off sunlike heat in an utterly indiscriminate manner. Let that loose in town, and I'd be dragged off as an

arsonist. The same went for the napalm.

The Daisy Petal spell didn't even need a mention. Forget innocent passersby, the thing was liable to burn unaware folks just relaxing nearby at home. The day I used it without consideration for my surroundings would be the end of me: I could just imagine a GM with a self-righteous smile asking, "By the way...do you happen to remember where this fight is taking place?"

We were going to become adventurers. How could I forget to pack an ace in the hole for urban campaigns?

My frenzied dance blurred the boundary between flesh and blade until a stinging pain shot through the back of my brain. I was close to bottoming out on mana, and this was my body's warning. Any more and I'd drop.

This was as good a time as any to end my experiment on how long I could keep up my maximum output. Though the process had me drenched in sweat, it had been worth it to know my limits. It would be quite the unfunny joke if I pulled it out in a real battle and knocked myself out cold, after all.

All things considered, I was satisfied with the result of my theorycrafting. Although I was still far from rivaling Lady Agrippina's absurd power, I felt like I was strong enough to subject any who had to fight me to a brutally unfair experience.

That said, it would probably be more efficient to just pull the whole box out if I ever knew I needed to go all out from the beginning of a fight. I also felt like that might be more intimidating than summoning each sword on its own.

Furthermore, I'd need to build another box or two once I could get my hands on the materials. In the middle of my test run, my rummaging had gotten the inside of the container so messy that I'd nearly fumbled while looking for my next weapon. I didn't want to scramble to pull things out of my interdimensional pocket like a certain robot cat beloved by toddlers.

For tonight, though, all that remained was to clean up, grab a drink at the well, and go to bed—but wait. I'd almost forgotten something important.

"Huh. What should I name this combo?"

I could hardly believe I'd forgotten to come up with a name for my portal-box

attack. Since reading out every skill that combined to achieve a given effect was too tedious, grouping actions together with shorthand nicknames was common practice for tabletop gamers. Some chose to go with simple labels like “Combo One”, “Combo Two”, and so on, while others made names that sounded like they’d get an evil arm or eye twitching—whatever the case, I found it to be an important step.

Not only did it save time, but more importantly, the true charm of TRPGs lay in the ability to express oneself with bespoke cool factor. Nothing could match the feeling of rolling dice while shouting out a smooth one-liner.

The Craving Blade weeped in disappointment as if to say, “Are we done already?” Ignoring the wailing, I thrust her into the ground—I had more important things to ponder.

[Tips] Combo names serve as shorthand references to a predetermined list of skills. A player may inform their GM of the combo’s cost and effects ahead of time to skip long clerical exchanges in the heat of combat.

Players are free to choose names that sate their inner middle-schooler or make total joke names. At the table, anything goes so long as it makes the experience more fun.

Snow rarely piled up in the southern parts of the Empire, but on one such occasion, we found ourselves huddling around the fireplace like ladybugs trying to brave the winter.

It was *cold*. Stone and wood didn't exactly make for the warmest houses; though it was better inside than out, it was still bad enough to risk frostbitten digits. First the rain on my last day in Berylin, and now the snow at home in Konigstuhl—why did the world have to throw a wrench in everything I did?

The warmest spot right by the hearth was reserved for the baby. Children were frail and needed all the warmth they could get, lest they travel back to the gods' laps. My newborn niece peacefully snoozed away in her cradle, enveloped by the fire's glow.

The next best spot went to the pregnant matron of the house. In the Trialist Empire, a woman carrying the future of the nation was second in importance to none; though she wouldn't be tucked into bed to rest at all hours, she could expect to enjoy the first pick in everything from meals to seats by the fire. Knitting tiny little socks for my sleeping niece—and for her little brother or sister on the way—my sister-in-law gently rocked her chair with a blissful smile.

Next came the head of the household: my father took the last open seat with my mother snuggling up against him. All together, they formed a wall that soaked up most of the heat and left us brothers fighting over whatever radiated through the cracks.

...Hey, wait. *Heinz* was supposed to be the current head of household. Why was he over here with us? Don't tell me he was still living out the consequences of drunkenly celebrating my helmet-splitting on his wedding night. If so, I felt kind of bad for setting him up for failure.

Swallowing my guilt, I held a little wooden statuette up to the light to scrutinize my work. For most canton-dwellers, a side gig was all there was to do during the wintertime. Since the biting gales kept us indoors, we swallowed the tremendous cost of heating with tears in our eyes, toiling away at secondary crafts. The fields may sleep, but a farmer knows no rest.

The Harvest Goddess was said to take the form of a beautiful woman with luscious wheat-blonde locks, but the depiction in my hands was so-so, I'd say.

With Dexterity worth touting as Divine Favor, my technical precision in whittling was top notch; but my Aesthetic Taste told me that, despite being a masterpiece in form, it was *all* form and no substance.

I figured this was as good as I could get without dipping into more specialized skills. These carvings could fetch a respectable price, but they would disappear, forgotten to history, like so many millions of other pieces of art.

But as a side hustle, that was more than enough. A bit more polish, and this could pay for my lodging until spring.

Just as I spent every winter whittling wood, my brothers repaired our farming tools and my mother and sister-in-law busied themselves with needlework. With how expensive fabrics were, common women bore the important responsibility of making clothes for their families to wear or, if they had time, to sell in the city. In fact, it was even said that a girl's skill in cooking and sewing were her sexiest qualities—facial features sat all the way down in third place.

"Hah... You know..." In a house full of tedium, Hans was occupied with perhaps the most monotonous job of all. Speaking as if straight from the heart, he sighed, "I wish you'd come home every winter, Erich."

He looked up from the fanciful calligraphy he was transcribing onto a piece of parchment, seeming rather affected. I supposed this wave of sentiment had been spurred on by the magic ball of light floating in the center of the room.

"Honestly. We save so much on firewood this way..."

My mother put a hand to her cheek and sighed, expelling a clinging exhaustion that only a housewife could know. To her point, the fireplace wasn't running on wood: it was a simple cantrip that turned mana into heat energy, basic enough to make a College affiliate cry with mocking laughter.

"Not to mention how the laundry's already done."

"And the roof's finally all fixed up."

Though their hands remained busy, Miss Mina and Heinz joined in. The other day, I'd been so bored that I'd gone around casting Clean on everything I could find; a little before that, I'd used an Unseen Hand to repair the edge of the roof my father had failed to all those years ago.

“No wonder the nobility employ mages. My wife’s place alone has two helpers, so I’ve always wondered how the real big-wigs manage to keep their giant mansions clean.”

Why thank you for offering alternative insight, Michael. By the by, are you supposed to be here right now? The elder twin was coming home more often than not to “listen to my stories about the capital,” but here he was slaving away with the rest of us. He did understand that he’d married into a good family, right?

Er, wait, no—that wasn’t what I needed to be focusing on here.

“Can you not treat my goodwill as the work of a convenient manservant?”

Yet in spite of my retort, I wasn’t actually upset. This was no different from how my old mother had lazed about on the couch when I’d come home and helped around the house; it was this special feeling of being taken for granted (in a good way) by one’s own family that truly made home feel like home. After all, these kinds of jokes wouldn’t even be coming my way anywhere else. If I were a guest, I’d promptly be sat down with a cup of tea and asked not to bother with anything; that was uncomfortable in its own right.

Here I could relish in the fact that this was my home and these were my people—something I would’ve never gotten had I taken Lady Agrippina’s offer. Living a life where I had to wait for someone else to tie my shoelaces would have been unbearable.

“Besides,” I went on, “sorcery isn’t just some tool to speed up housework, you know.”

“But it sure does help with it. Right, Mina?”

“It really does. I wish I could use magic myself.”

I’d figured it wasn’t right to keep my family in the dark, but I may have laid out too much of my hand. Not that I was too beaten up about it, though: they hadn’t fallen into the trap of taking magic for granted in their everyday lives, but rather were just airing out how much of a pain normal chores were going to be after tasting this level of luxury.

“You think Elisa’ll come home with these sorts of spells?”

“Oh my, then maybe she’ll be able to help around the house like Erich is.”

“Please, Mother. Weren’t you listening to what Erich said the other day? By the time she’s free to do as she wants, she’ll be a bona fide noble. If she ever comes to visit, she’ll have to stay with the magistrate so they can house her retainers.”

Michael and my mother leisurely voiced their fantasies, but the youngest of my brothers had a far less idealistic take. Scratching his temple with a quill in hand, he’d studied up on the ways of the upper class in preparation for his induction into the magistrate’s cabinet this upcoming spring. He knew the simple truth that the haves and have-nots were irreconcilably different.

Even ties of blood did little to bridge the gap between those who rose to the top of society and their families. Whether related or not, a noble was to be addressed by their rank—such was the decree of the nation.

Any individual noble could wish for intimacy, but society would not allow it. Cracks would form in the nation should the idea of class distinctions ever come into question; what then would become of the Empire’s claim to power?

At most, a noblewoman could drop her airs and speak to a layperson plainly in isolated rooms with her servants shooed away. For a girl who had loved her family more than anything else, it was a cruel fate indeed. But, well, there were sure to be ways of getting around that going forward.

“I guess using magic the way Erich does is the best after all.”

“Magic?!”

My sister-in-law’s melancholic mumbling was punctuated by a high-pitched cry coming from the toddler who’d been snoozing on her lap. The firstborn son of our next generation, the boy cradling his unborn sibling was the first to bestow the title of “uncle” unto me in this world.

His name was Herman. With his walking and talking close to stabilizing out, the three-year-old bundle of vitality spent every waking moment busily worrying us with his antics. Despite inheriting his dad’s bottomless energy, he was the delicate Miss Mina’s spitting image. Had he been born on Earth, he would have been a shoo-in to be ferried around as a child actor; here, though,

his heart had been taken when I'd first cast a spell for him.

At every turn, he toddled over with his twinkling little puppy-dog eyes and begged, "Unka Erich? Magic please?" It was too adorable for my grown-up heart to handle; I could swear on my life that he was second in the world only to Elisa. Naturally, I'd done what any uncle would do and had shown him all sorts of little tricks.

As a direct consequence, Herman was incredibly sensitive when it came to the word "magic," and our constant use of the term had roused him from his comfortable slumber on Miss Mina's lap.

Looking up at the gentle glow hanging from the ceiling, he gasped in amazement and stared for a while—he really was precious. Being looked up to so unconditionally left me a bit ticklish, but it warmed me up from the bottom of my heart.

I'd crafted the ball of light to mimic the luminosity of a forty watt lightbulb: my family only knew candles and oil lamps, and this made it incomparably easier to see. It never flickered, nor did it cast inconvenient shadows on account of its high position. Although similar mystic tools were relatively inexpensive in the capital—by noble standards, at least—it was a real marvel in the southern countryside.

Seeing as it was getting such good reception, I figured I'd put together a mystic lamp for them before I left.

"Wow, Unka! You're super!"

"Really, Herman? Why, thank you very much."

Herman ran into my leg and hugged me with a wide-eyed innocence that reminded me of Elisa when she'd been younger. Back when she'd first learned to walk around, she'd clung to my legs like this too. Though we'd begun holding hands instead once she'd gotten a bit older, being relied on with a full-bodied show of affection was one of my favorite memories from being a big brother.

My nephew had a fixation on magic, so I planned to make him a wand once I was finished carving this piece. I wanted to add a simple enchantment so that the tip would glow when the wielder shouted out and swung the thing around

—I'd gotten my niece a toy just like that a lifetime ago.

Ah, but wait: I didn't want his friends getting jealous. Maybe I was better off making a whole set with swords and shields like I'd done for my brothers back in the day. One prop weapon wouldn't even take an hour for me to make at this point, so the work would be worth it to let little Herman play adventurer with his pals.

A cool sword paired with a hefty shield; a long spear that could make anyone look like a knight; a stylish and mysterious wand; and an impressive but stringless bow. If I could put together an arsenal with all of that, he was sure to be the most popular kid in town.

"Unka, I wanna magic too."

"You do? Well, then, how about I make you a wand? And I'll build some weapons so you can go play with your friends."

"Really?!" he yelped with sparkling eyes.

"Your uncle never lies," I laughed, patting his head.

I'd brought home some inferior gems thinking that they might make good catalysts for something, and making a fancy toy for my nephew was as good a cause as any. With that, I could probably have the thing make sounds too—but on second thought, I didn't want his toy to be too much nicer than his pals'.

Toys could define the pecking order between kids, so I had to be careful. I didn't want him to get bullied because I'd spoiled him too much.

"Oh? Is your nephew the only one getting a present from you?"

"Of course not, Sister Dearest. Shall I make a doll for our sleeping beauty in the crib? I've dabbled in needlework myself, you know."

True, it wouldn't be fair if I only made something for my nephew. I'd ask for some scraps of cloth and stitch together a doll sometime. While I'd have to forgo expensive cotton stuffing for the cheaper straw, I was sure my niece would have a fun time playing house if I could copy the fancy designs I'd seen in Berylinian shops.

"But Unka! Me! Me first!"

“Don’t you worry, Herman. Your uncle’s good with his hands, see? I’ll have your toys ready before you know it. In fact, I even made the toys that your dada and I used to play with.”

“Heh, that takes me back,” Heinz said. “You know, I’ve still got that sword you made me when you were five.”

“Huh? You do?”

“Course I do. It’s sturdy enough to use again with a new coat of varnish. I’d been keeping it for when I had a son...but, well, looks like Herman’s more a fan of mages.”

My eldest brother had been a diehard fan of swordsmen, and he seemed a touch disappointed to discover his son wasn’t following in his footsteps. But personally, I was moved to hear he’d kept my amateur work this whole time; perhaps this would become one of my favorite memories of being a little brother.

“Aw man, the spear you made for me broke...all ’cause Mother kept using it to prop stuff up.”

“Oh yeah, I remember that. You were *bawling* back then, Michael.”

“Shut up, Hans. Don’t forget that *you* were the one who lost the tip of your wand and hid it from Erich for as long as you could.”

Ha, I almost forgot about that. Not only were we a bunch of dumb kids who didn’t know how to take care of stuff, but I hadn’t been nearly as good a craftsman in my childhood. I’d fixed up those old playthings more times than I could count.

“I can remember us four going out on adventures like yesterday,” I said.

“Come to think of it,” Heinz responded, “you always played the mages and priests even when we were kids. I was more of a swordsman type.”

“That was only because *you three* always took the coolest roles.”

Any family reunion worth its salt was sure to include a trip down memory lane, complete with all sorts of biased revisions. Nostalgia washed over me: we’d spent so many days venturing into the forest in search of the fabled fairy

coin. Though we never managed to find it, the memories were worth more than the most sterling gold piece.

“Really?” Heinz said.

“Yeah, *really*,” Michael joined in. “You always had to be the leader.”

“Hey, come on. I let you guys lead sometimes.”

“Uh huh, *some*times. But even then, you still had to be a swordsman!”

“I can attest to that,” I said. “Even as a kid, I remember thinking, ‘Why do we have three front-liners?!’ and choosing wands and bows because of that.”

“Unkas adventured with Dada?”

“We sure did,” we said, regaling our nephew with tales of our exploits. Greatly pleased by our stories, he merrily announced that he was going to go on an adventure too. In which case, I’d need to hurry up with the cool gear so he could search for the fairy coin just like his old man.

“But our youngest’s a girl,” Heinz said. “I hope our next will be a boy so he can go out and play with Herman.”

“That’s true,” Michael agreed. “Having brothers made it a lot easier to have fun when we were kids.”

“But I feel bad for Elisa, since she was the only girl,” Hans said. “We were all too bratty to stay by her bedside and just talk... I wish I’d spent more time with her. Erich was the only one who actually stayed on her level.”

“Not at all,” I said. “Elisa loves all of you plenty. Remember how you’d always bring her raspberries and snake skins and pretty butterfly wings when you went out? Those were her treasures, and she kept everything locked away in her little box.”

A chorus of “Oh yeah!” followed as we spoke fondly of our little sister still hard at work in the capital. Although Herman had never met her, our discussion sparked a great deal of interest in his aunt.

“Your Aunt Elisa is studying in the capital to be an even more amazing mage than me. Look, this is what she looks like.”

“Wah! Pretty princess!”

In a world without photography, our stories and this small painting were all we had to share who she was. The portrait I’d gotten from Lady Leizniz truly did depict her like a princess, and Herman was ecstatic.

Isn’t your aunt cute? I thought smugly. This portrait wasn’t even embellished, so little Herman would never be let down by seeing her in person. In fact, by the time Elisa could come home to visit Konigstuhl, she would probably have grown up to be even prettier than she was now.

That said, the painting was very well done. Lady Leizniz’s high standards evidently did not end with fashion: the work was realistic, yet not overly detailed, using just the right amount of lines blocked with color to create an elegant final form. Had this picture been used to solicit marriage, any suitor was sure to have their hearts struck in an instant.

But then again, fraudulence was everywhere. Back in my time under the madam, I’d handled proposals complete with drop-dead gorgeous portraits; when I’d investigated the sender further, it invariably turned out that so many artistic liberties had been taken that they were basically a different person. In other words, Elisa was amazing to reach this level *without* undue touch-ups.

Hearing Herman innocently say, “Ann Elisa’s super too!” put me in such a good mood that I lifted him onto my lap and pulled out my pipe.

Lighting a mystic flame, I blew a puff of smoke into a cage of Unseen Hands. Shifting the invisible appendages around, I formed a smoky bird; moving them a bit more, I made the bird flap. Herman let out a happy squeak and clapped his hands together without reserve.

Out of all the cheap arcane tricks I’d shown him, this was his favorite. I guessed children of every era and world just loved seeing adults play with smoke: on Earth, I remembered my grandfather had kept me entertained with smoke rings.

Owing to my nostalgia, I took a page out of his book and blew a smoke ring and then had the bird fly through it. Seeing my nephew’s clapping grow more excited put a soft smile on my face; I could only hope that this would become a nice memory for him one day.

“I bet you could put bread on the table with that.”

“Forget adventuring, you should put on shows in the city.”

This wasn’t tobacco-based, but I didn’t want a three-year-old inhaling smoke. I sent the bird out the cracked window we’d left open for ventilation. As I did, the twins quipped at me; though, honestly, I thought they were massively underestimating how hard it was to be a performer.

“You dolts! Erich’s gonna become an adventurer to carry on our dreams! Don’t bog him down with nonsense!”

Adding to the pile, my eldest brother told them to stop spouting nonsense but was, ironically, doing just that. I hadn’t chosen my career path to carry on some torch that my brothers had left behind.

“One day, a minstrel’s gonna come into this canton singing songs of Erich’s adventures! Songs like, uh...*Erich and the Holy Blade*!”

“That’s a complete ripoff, though.”

“And it’s got your tastes written all over it. Come on, you couldn’t think of anything better?”

“The hell?! Brothers or not, I won’t let you get away with making fun of *Jeremias and the Holy Blade*!”

Getting excited was well and good, but my brothers would do well to notice how the missus of the house had begun narrowing her eyes into a glare. If they didn’t rein themselves in soon, I refused to be responsible for the inevitable storm that would follow. Any louder, and my niece Nikola was going to...

“Waaah!”

...wake up. As expected, my brother’s eldest daughter did not take kindly to having her fireside nap interrupted, and promptly began crying.

“Herman, what do you say we go outside? I can blow bigger clouds of smoke outdoors.”

“Yay! Outside!”

Wrathful lightning was about to strike, and I whisked my nephew away to

escape it. This time it was absolutely, positively not my fault, so I wasn't going to stick around. Brushing off my brothers' betrayed stares, I stepped into the front yard and started entertaining Herman with more tricks. I was sure Miss Mina wouldn't be able to go all out with her son watching anyway; my brothers were due for a serious chewing-out.

"Hey, Erich."

As I chuckled at my adorable nephew toddling after the smoky sailboat I'd made, my father suddenly appeared beside me. Apparently, he didn't want to hear the lecture either.

"When do you plan on leaving?"

"Well, I'm thinking of heading out once the snow melts."

As much as I wanted to stay until the end of the sowing season, my destination was too far to put off my departure. Ende Erde was over a month away for those traveling light, and with our luggage I wanted at least two months' time.

Unlike Japanese schools, there was no mandate that we begin our adventuring in spring. Yet while Rhine had no cherry blossoms, the season just felt right for new beginnings. Besides, common knowledge dictated that journeys were best started before the first seeds were sown so as not to be dragged into a whole season of work.

"I see. Just a month or two left, then."

"Yeah... But the Goddess seems to be enjoying Her slumber this year."

Winter was the Harvest Goddess's respite after a year of hard work. That Her blanket was laid on so thick suggested that She'd be late to rise in the spring. That meant less time to till the fields, but it wasn't like we could complain to our deity about Her taking a break; my family would just have to do their best. In exchange, it was said that the fall would see a harvest more bountiful than usual—such was Her way of making it up to us.

"Hey, Erich?"

"Yes, Father?"

I was preparing a new cloud for Herman when my father suddenly turned to me with a serious tone. Surprised, I looked away from the little boy rolling in snow and over at him, only to find his gaze was just as serious. I stood upright, ready to hear out what he had to say.

"I think something like 'Sworddancer' would be good. Thoughts?"

Not you too, old man!

[Tips] Epithets, monikers, nicknames—whatever you call them, secondary titles are rhetorical ornaments that serve to quickly illustrate a famous person's exploits. Most heroes who appear in poems and sagas have one, and those with particularly long lists of accomplishments tend to amass just as many bynames.

That said, how an individual reacts to the names society gives them is entirely up to them.

In the heat of summer, nothing could match a cold glass of fruit-infused water after a bath; in the cold of winter, though, heating up in the sauna until the brink of stroke was best capped off by a dive into the snow. Letting loose after pushing one's endurance to the limit was simply divine. The feeling of all that heat vanishing in the blink of an eye left the mind feeling clearer than pure water.

"Woo, that's cold!"

"Ha ha, I could get used to this!"

Even in winter, the steam baths of Konigstuhl ran at regular intervals. I joined the men of the canton—I wasn't going to stick with the kids as a legal adult—to sweat out the grime of daily life. The rare snowstorm let us forgo our usual dunk into the river for a fresher experience in a sea of white. This was all new for me: I'd seen snow pile up in the capital, but I obviously wasn't going to roll around in the yards of the crown's public bathhouses.

And boy, was I enjoying myself. As obnoxious as the snow was, I could almost learn to love it thanks to this refreshment. Now I finally understood why Mika

had pined for their hometown's winters every time we'd gone to the baths. Jumping into rivers and cold-water baths was great in its own right, but there was this indescribable softness to the cold of snow that was totally new to me.

I, along with all the other men in the village, frolicked in the white like we'd turned into kids again. We ran around and pelted each other with snow until it got cold, when we'd run off back to the bathhouse. This was supposed to engage the sympathetic nervous system and thus help the body regulate itself—but basically, it felt good, so it was good.

We huddled around the stoves, throwing on more water to enjoy the steam that they let off. After a while, when I was starting to feel nice and cooked, someone sat down in the spot next to me.

"Oh," I said. "Nice to see you."

It was the old dvergar who ran the Konigstuhl smithy. He didn't look to have aged a day since I'd left the canton. The only noticeable difference was that his beard was a tiny bit bigger.

Or, well, it *had been* when I'd first seen him after returning. The air was so humid here that his magnificent mane had been reduced to a squirrely wet rag.

"You too, Erich. By the way, I finished those adjustments you were asking for."

"Already? You work as quickly as ever, I see. Thank you very much."

While "scratching" his back with a birch branch—he was striking himself hard enough for it to count as a flogging—the smithy let me know that my order was ready. Truth be told, one of the first things I'd done upon making my way home was to swing by his shop and ask him to look at my gear.

My armor wasn't totally trashed or anything: I'd just grown a bit taller and had begun feeling some tightness around my shoulders. I'd asked him to tweak things to match my current proportions, and he'd finished earlier than I'd thought.

It goes to show that his experience crafting for adventurers and mercenaries in the city wasn't just for show. When I'd taken my beaten-up armor to get repaired after that sewer fiasco a couple of years ago, the man at the Berylinian

smithing union had been thoroughly impressed with his work.

Although the materials used in my armor were run-of-the-mill, the repairman had been wowed by the smithy's commitment to not cutting corners; he'd likened the neatly uniform chain links to the smoothness of cloth.

I hadn't been able to appreciate the craftsmanship as a layman in the field, but apparently the curves of the leather were incredibly precise and perfectly suited to deflecting oncoming blades. This was, according to the man, as good as it got for unenchanted gear.

Of particular note was the adjustment system. The Konigstuhl smithy had made my armor with future growth in mind, and while that wasn't unusual in and of itself, the mechanics of how he'd implemented that had captured the repairman's imagination. I suspected that the reason he'd been so thorough was because he wanted to reverse engineer the techniques for his own use.

The capital didn't have much in the way of manufacturing, but it *did* have a solid number of smiths for swords and armor. The reason boiled down to a simple show of power: the crown and its army hosted grand parades every few years, and whether social or militaristic in nature, the various nobles vying for dominance put in regular orders for gear. Even in peacetime, the capital was full of master smiths.

Although the articles made there were rarely used in real combat, the armor was tuned to shield the wearer at all costs and the swords were sharpened to cut through foes equipment and all. For a leading smith in a city like Berylin—I'd known Lady Franziska was going to put in a word with someone good, but I hadn't expected the *head* of the smithing union—to be impressed by the Konigstuhl smithy's work was telling.

"But you sure have been going at it, kid."

"You can tell?"

"Course I can. Cuts, dents, arrow graze marks... Running my hand over the leather's enough to tell you've run the gamut of every wound known to man. Hell, looks like you've been hit with *magic*! What in the Goddess's name have you been up to?"

“Ha ha ha... Uh, lots, I guess.”

Steam bath aside, I could feel my cheeks grow red. I’d encountered many predicaments where my skill wasn’t enough to get through without relying on my armor.

Come to think of it, I really had been pushing myself.

I’d fought a daemonic ogre in the lakeside manor as a boy, then a crew of marauding mercenaries just before heading into an ichor maze created by a demonic sword—*No, I am* not *calling for you; quit beaming thoughts into my brain*—only to be dragged around the capital as Lady Agrippina’s steward, and endure an onslaught of bad luck on my way home. Across it all, there had been plenty of hits I couldn’t block or dodge: each time, my armor was what kept me alive. Injured though I may have been, the smithy’s work had made sure I never went down for good.

The only exception had been my subterranean run-in with the crank of high rank in the sewers of Berylin...but that was an exception among exceptions, so it didn’t count. Even if I’d shelled out hundreds of drachmae for the finest plate armor money could buy, I doubted I would’ve been able to muscle through his attack.

I was a lightweight fencer type: dodging and parrying were my main defensive maneuvers, and armor was the final layer for when those failed. I couldn’t be more appreciative of what I had. With how many ambushes I’d suffered during my stint as a noblewoman’s bodyguard, those patches of leather had saved me more times than I could count. The constant threat of my many-legged rivals skittering in the shadows had meant I would’ve eaten a knife to my guts had I not been perennially equipped.

“But you know...”

The smithy grabbed my shoulder with a firm grip. Surprised, I turned to find the man eyeing my body with the same scrutinizing gaze he employed for finished works.

“Look, I won’t yap about you looking healthy and sound, but where the blazes are your scars?”

“Huh?”

Utterly puzzled, he yanked me around and checked me all over. He ran a finger across my skin as if he were trying to jog his memory.

“Like here: something stabbed you hard enough to rip through your underarmor, but I can’t see a thing on your body. Or your shoulders: the padding was so beat up that I figured you’d have a bit of stiffness in your joint, at least. But most of all, look at this left arm: the armor made me think you’d twisted the damn thing off.”

After the repairs in the capital, I hadn’t been able to tell that the armor had been destroyed at all. Yet the master craftsman’s eye was evidently keener, and he was able to see right through what I’d been through.

“Don’t even see any trace of you getting sewn up. Even magic healing leaves a mark, y’know? But you’ve got the skin of a princess, kid.”

“Well, I happened to know a good doctor.”

Indeed, I knew *several* good “doctors” who were rather overprotective... If whimsically doling out supernatural “medicine” could be considered an act of protection, that is. Alas, their meddling meant I lacked any impressive battle scars.

At this rate, I’d never get to do the thing: whether in the bath or the bed, I’d never get to pull out the timeless “Oh, this? I got this when...” Showing off my badassery in sexy ways was one of my dreams, dammit!

I was a big fan of subdued toughness in roleplaying, so scars had a special place in my heart. To this day, I could remember how excited I’d been when the GM had remembered my PC’s scars and incorporated it into a scene. But with how things were now, I just looked like a normal, healthy boy. For all the muscle I was putting on, I was far from being shredded. Personally, I would’ve been happy to be as bulky as those interstellar marines who strapped chainsaws to their guns.

“Wait, are you talking about your adventures?!”

Apparently, Heinz had overheard a part of our conversation. Not one to be left out of any adventurous discussion, he came running over with snow still

clinging to his frame.

...Huh. Looking at him now, my brother was pretty well-built. Our family's relative prosperity afforded us a fairly nutritious diet, and both my mother and sister-in-law tended to make balanced meals. Add to that his life of labor in the fields and around the house, and he had a winning recipe for a killer body.

It wasn't just him, either: everyone on the Konigstuhl Watch looked like a proper tough guy, complete with scars that engaged a viewer's curiosity—especially Sir Lambert. He was sitting just a short ways away, enduring the sauna's heat in meditative fashion. Yet even with his eyes closed, he was just so much larger than life. I knew he was a good person, and it was *still* intimidating to try and take a seat next to the mountain of a man.

He had pecs of bedrock and his shoulder was sturdier than a steel support beam; his girthy torso laid a foundation to carry his mass, and his legs were pillars of marble to hold everything up. Scars and stitches zipped across his skin, telling the tales of arrows, burns, and painful skids. Though he sat still without a word, his body loudly conveyed the strength that lay within.

How could I call myself a boy—ignore my total age for a moment—if I didn't look up to *that*?! Ugh, I wanted to be like him so badly: I, too, wanted to march around the mortal plain with the build of a god of war.

As I recounted the events that had led to the damage on my armor for the smithy and my brother, I couldn't help but steal glances at Sir Lambert. But, for whatever reason, I had a funny feeling that someone somewhere was screaming, "Please, just stay the way you are!"

[Tips] Most arcane limb replacements leave a mark, but there are also a handful of methods that do not. Certain spells and miracles work either by transferring wounds away or making it so that the initial injury "never happened" to begin with; in these cases, there is no wound to leave a scar.

For whatever reason, the Kanda River popped into my head...but why? I had the inkling that it had something to do with my past life, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. Recently, I was having a lot of trouble remembering these sorts

of things; memory was quick to decay when left to sit unused.

It was at times like this when I truly envied the races with immutable notepads built into their brains, never at risk of having the ink disappear off the page. Having a term come to mind without any idea of why it was relevant felt terribly vexing.

Yet mysteriously enough, more technical knowledge seemed to remain accessible, and once I remembered one thing, several related ideas usually came to me quickly after. That I couldn't remember this time meant that it was probably some miscellaneous fact of little importance.

"Is something the matter?"

"No, don't worry about it."

Margit looked at me with her head tilted in curiosity; I covered her up with a mantle and hoisted her into my arms. Dampened by the steam of the bathhouse, her ordinarily tied hair flowed straight down in eye-catching fashion. I'd hidden her away beneath a large hood to keep her shielded from the cold, but that only added to her enchanting ambience: something about the stray locks spilling out from under the cloak tickled my heartstrings. A new take on show-don't-tell, I supposed.

The women of the canton had gotten their turn to bathe after the men, and Margit had asked me to come pick her up when they were done. The bathhouse was placed in a nice scenic spot next to the river, which also placed it out of the way relative to the canton; it wasn't exactly the easiest place to get home from for a tiny arachne.

Not to say that the snow was packed enough to bury her, nor that someone as lightweight as her couldn't stay above the surface by deftly distributing her weight across all eight legs. She was contributing plenty to the winter hunting season, and I would never insinuate that she didn't have the means to catch her footing in snow.

However, her kind's inherent weakness to the cold was a separate matter, especially right after she'd spent a long stretch of time in a hot bathhouse. Stepping into the frigid cold after acclimating to the heat and with her hair still wet was an easy way to get sick.

As such, the natural chain of logic led her to call for someone to ferry her home. By turning me into a human taxi, she'd minimize her contact with the icy snow and get home sooner so she could dry off properly.

Just as I'd answered her call, I'd crossed paths with Margit's father carrying his wife and the new heir of the house in his youngest daughter. As they went along, I'd received the rather insidious tip that they would be spending the night in their hunting cottage.

"Ahh," Margit sighed, hanging off my neck and nestling into my cloak as much as her own. "You're always so nice and warm."

"Any mensch would feel warm from your perspective. Plus, it isn't all me—I've got heating today."

I had some hand warmers lining my inner pocket to ward away the cold. They were simple cotton pouches with heated igneous rocks inside, but a few of them did wonders to fight the elements. These were a must for anyone walking around in the winter months.

Sure, I could've just flicked on a magic barrier, but why waste the mana? Besides, I wanted to enjoy the fresh air on my skin on the path home.

"Really, now? But *your* warmth is my favorite, Erich. I'd like to take it home with me if I could."

"You do me too good an honor, my lady... But you know, since I'm carrying you back, I think that last bit is already true."

"Oh, I suppose you're right."

She snickered in my arms as I crunched the snow under my feet. Once we arrived, I would need to light the fireplace, pat down her hair with a cut of cloth, and dry said cloth by said fireplace. I could always use an add-on to Clean wet towels into being dry, but it wouldn't do to cut corners here. A lady had asked me to dry her hair, and I was going to oblige the old-fashioned way—call it a gentleman's hospitality.

"Hee hee," Margit giggled. "I wonder how many chances we'll come across to enjoy a relaxing bath once the snow melts and we set off."

“Any time we want, I’m sure. The crown operates public bathhouses in Marsheim, you know.”

“Oh, but that isn’t what I meant. The journey *to* Marsheim is to be a long one, isn’t it? Can you fault a girl for worrying about the long road ahead?”

As I marched through the snow, we began to talk about the future that awaited beyond its melt. The blizzards were still rolling through for the moment, but sooner or later the Goddess would awaken from Her slumber.

Once She did, we would be off for the frontier. Margit had given up her inheritance without any hesitation, and her mother had been similarly terse in letting her eldest go; but leaving this cozy little canton behind remained a tremendous ask.

After all, I’d just gotten back, and I was already finding it hard to leave.

For now, we’d soak in the sight of our home so we wouldn’t forget it. Slowly and quietly, lingering like the icy droplets on her hair.

[Tips] In the Rhinian tradition, a man caring for a woman’s hair is symbolic of deep trust and love.

I may not speak for everyone, but I truly believed the most fun part of any long journey was the night before it began. Packing all my belongings into a limited set of space in as efficient and safe a distribution as possible was a real challenge, and the sense of accomplishment that accompanied it was proportional.

All the things I’d unraveled upon arriving in early winter went back into their places. The space that had once been home to the presents I’d prepared was not empty, but rather stuffed with presents from the people of Konigstuhl: dried rations and the like to wish me a safe trip. Getting everything to fit neatly had been quite the struggle, but I was just about done.

The snow had melted. Although the shortened window to sow was a point of stress for all, the canton was in a frenzy to make sure the spring festival would still run on time. In between checking their seeds and wiping the oil off their

plows and hoes, the organizers counted up the barrels in the local wine cellar and went from house to house to collect from those who could afford to fund the celebrations.

This year's spring was shaping up to be a tumultuous one. The later spring arrived, the less time to sow seeds; if seeds weren't sown in time, even the relatively generous tax policy of a forty-sixty split—where farmers kept sixty percent of their yields—would become a painful burden.

Having to pay in both cash and crops meant yeomen were especially grave when it came to their production. An agricultural peasant wasn't going to be hanged or have their lands stripped for missing one year's taxes, of course, but the threat of the difference being tacked onto the next year's sum with interest was enough to whip any farmer into shape. If one could save a needless expense just by working hard, then hard work was going to be done.

I wouldn't be helping, though: I didn't want to delay my departure by a whole season, and I'd already informed my family that I was going to leave as soon as the snow melted. No one had complained. I hadn't been counted among our labor pool to begin with.

Still, it pricked at my conscience to laze about while my loved ones were all busy, so I lent a hand with the preparations. My Blade Sharpening technique was at the same III: Apprentice level that it had been since I was a kid, but I helped whet the heads of some farm tools. I also made myself useful by producing a whole bunch of wooden wedges: these were useful for supporting fences and reinforcing olive trees but quick to break, so having an abundance of them was always welcome.

Lastly, I didn't want my family to be the target of jealousy over having a son come home with Berylinian money or having a daughter propped up to be a future noble, so I made a little donation.

The money came from all the odd jobs I'd taken on the way home. I'd packed most of it into my farewell present to Dietrich, but what remained was more than enough to fund a renovation on the dilapidated town square.

More importantly, I shelled out to commission a communal horse-drawn plow from the Konigstuhl smithy. Usually, one would be bought by several families

pooling together their money, and they'd end up fighting over who was going to use it in what order every year. If we were responsible for putting up one all by ourselves, few would be willing to voice any criticism of my family.

Truthfully, this spending had my wallet feeling rather light, but that was fine: I wasn't interested in starting my adventure with a money cheat code anyway. I'd kept enough silver to reasonably make the journey, and this was the least I could do in exchange for skipping out on a particularly busy spring season.

Man, having my back to the wall sure got me going! Taking myself as a given, the task of making sure Castor and Polydeukes didn't go hungry was starting to sound like a fun challenge!

I giddily closed the lid of my knapsack and hauled it over to the front door when I ran into my oldest brother in the living room.

"Oh, Erich. You're still up?"

Heinz smelled faintly of alcohol. He'd probably attended the community meeting to plan for the spring festival. Every year, the local lord and priest gathered with the heads of households to iron out the schedule, foods, and expenses for the celebration.

That my brother had been the one to go instead of our father proved that the passing of the torch was progressing smoothly. Heinz was now a capable adult with a full beard and a couple of children; our old man sending him to participate was a wonderful sign. It was all too common for this to be the breaking point in parent-child relationships, and seeing that our parents weren't second-guessing Heinz as their heir was incredibly reassuring.

"Yeah, I wanted to get my things ready to go."

"Ah, right... Hey, are you sure about leaving tomorrow? Why not stay until the festival, at least?"

I placed my pack in the corner with the rest of my belongings, and my brother gestured for me to sit down. I'd heard this offer a few times already, but I was dead set on leaving before the festival—the longer I stayed, the harder it was for *me* to go. Besides, the festivities were a reward paid in advance to honor the hard work that laid ahead. I didn't feel like it would be fair for me to participate.

Add to that the distance of my destination, and skipping town before the spring festival was a no-brainer.

At any rate, it was too late to change my mind. Today's lunch had been a lavish going-away meal—a truly special one. My mother had remembered all my favorite dishes, and the whole menu was packed with things I liked: the soft sweetness of root celery soup, crispy fried cutlets, and the infamous sauerkraut that no two families made the same.

Everything had been wonderful. I'd sampled my fair share of epicurean cuisine at Lady Agrippina's side, but not a single one of them could even compare.

How many more times will I get to enjoy the flavors of home?

I'd gone through this once before, in my last life...but this time it was all the more true. In Japan, I'd been a few train stops away from going to visit, and I'd had enough vacation time to spend the night at my parents' a handful of times every year, not even counting how I'd see them at New Year's and Obon and the like. Whenever I'd wished to talk to them, I had; a few swipes and taps on a telephone were all it had taken to have a conversation. The sound on the other end may have been a mere digital reproduction of their voices, but it had been enough to feel my family's warmth when I was feeling lonely.

But not here.

Forget telephones, there was hardly any guarantee that physical letters would be delivered reliably. To make matters worse, life was frailer here: whether by plague, violence, or accident, the causes of death were too real to forget. The safety of my faraway family wasn't something I could ever feel at ease over.

Still, I couldn't let myself dawdle. Dragging my feet did nobody any favors. The reality was that I couldn't stay here forever.

"I'll be leaving as planned. Staying here any longer would be cowardice."

"Cowardice, huh? ...Yeah. I guess so."

This was my *home*. Of course it was comfortable; I'd been blessed with a loving family. But I'd found something that I truly wanted to do, and I had to take a strong first step—otherwise my leap forward would become a tumbling

faceplant.

Soaking in my words, Heinz reached into his pocket and dug around for a moment, eventually producing a canteen wrapped in leather. It was a hip flask: slightly curved and intended for strong liquor. Spirits were handy for disinfecting water or wounds, so most adults who worked outside carried one around at all times.

They'd been a fad on Earth as a way of evading alcohol taxes, but here the popularity was wholly pragmatic. They weren't props chosen on cool factor, nor were they a convenient trinket for drunkards, and they certainly weren't the product of some fellow reincarnator wanting to camp out and drink in style...right? I mean...*right*?

"Take it. Consider it a parting gift."

"Huh?"

"You don't have one, yeah? C'mon, no harm in carrying a flask."

Instead of drinking, Heinz pushed the bottle onto me. Clearly full, the tin container was hefty in my hands; he must've brought home some of the booze they'd served at the meeting.

He was right to say I didn't have a flask. As a mage, I hadn't really needed one: artificially boiling water was good enough to disinfect it, and it wasn't like I was so wiry that I couldn't sleep without a swig.

But going forward, that wouldn't necessarily be the case. Camping without the comfort of a roof for days on end could very well wear on my mind, and I wouldn't be able to cast spells freely in the presence of anyone but Margit. I ran the risk of losing the little comforts I'd enjoyed thus far.

This truly was a wonderful gift.

"Plus, you know... 'How can your travels be safe if you leave the old pal in your pocket at home?'"

As the weight of the flask truly sank in, my brother scratched his nose and blushed. This time, it wasn't the alcohol.

"Oh... From *Jeremias and the Holy Blade*."

“Er, well, yeah.”

That was a quote from Heinz’s favorite epic saga. It was a one-off line in the opening act spoken by the hero’s family as they see him off and never again, but the scene itself was memorable.

My big brother had tried to act cool, and me noticing was just making him redder. I decided not to tease him; I felt like I knew the emotion well.

Besides...this was all a little brother could ask for.

“Thank you. I’ll take care of it.”

“Yeah... You do that.”

I popped open the flask and was hit with the strong stench of liquor. It was probably an imitation of the strong stuff found on the northern archipelago; I could pick up the hallmarks of barley and peat.

Taking a swig—and wincing on account of my kid tongue—I passed it to Heinz, who did the same. We looked at each other for a second without saying a word and laughed.

“All right,” he said, turning toward the master bedroom, “I’m going to bed. Don’t stay up too late.”

His ears were still red as he walked away. As I took another swig of the stinging booze, I smiled to myself.

Heh, my big brother’s a lovable guy.

[Tips] Spirits are a cure-all solution for everything from water to wounds...or at least, that is the trademark response of alcoholics across the land who like to drink on the job. The popular barley-based liquors originate from the islands to the Empire’s north, but Rhinian distilleries make similarly potent spirits with local wines.

However, the process is more advanced than traditional brewing, causing serious fluctuations in quality between the best and worst distilleries—some are downright undrinkable. They are also too expensive for regular consumption for the average person, and are considered a modest luxury

item.

The words “Don’t go!” have tremendous power when spoken by a little child. My once unwavering oath to not look back was being tested like never before.

I felt like looking back was the lamest thing a departee could do. It was a sign that they hadn’t steeled themselves; that they hadn’t gotten over their fear of leaving; that they weren’t ready to see through their own damn decision. Watching someone glance over their shoulder again and again was the sort of thing that would sour my mood.

But *man* was it hard to fight the urge when I was the one leaving.

“Well aren’t we popular, Uncle Erich?”

“*Please* don’t tease me right now.”

A playful voice giggled in my ear, bobbing up and down with the gentle sway of the saddle. As per usual, Margit was glued to me like a human backpack.

We were strolling along a road a short ways outside the canton. Castor had the brunt of our luggage, while the two of us doubled up on Polydeukes; this way we could divide the load between them evenly.

“There were so many little ones there to see you off. It seems endearment comes with its own set of tribulations.”

“I didn’t think they’d *cry*.”

My farewell wasn’t anything so grand. Everyone was busy at work, so I slipped away mostly unnoticed.

But my nephew Herman and all his neighborhood friends—whom I’d made about three parties’ worth of wooden adventuring weapons for—had really taken a liking to me. Watching them play had been an anxiety-inducing experience, so I’d taught them a bunch of stuff over the winter: how to hold their weapons, how to angle their shields, how to roll off momentum when they got hit, and so on. Though it had ended up being like a kiddie version of the Watch, they seemed to have enjoyed my company.

So they’d all come to say goodbye. At first, they’d all said their thank-yous and

good-lucks like the good kids they were, but eventually, Herman lost control of his emotions and had begun crying. As soon as he did, all hell had broken loose: the rest of them started bawling like dominos.

Gods, that had been an ordeal. I'd pulled out every spell in the book, and nothing could get them to stop. Out of ideas, I'd raised my voice and barked, "You'll never be real adventurers if you keep crying like this!" and they'd finally pulled themselves together.

Endearment really did come with its own tribulations. Leaving home was hard enough as it was; how was I supposed to not feel anything after that?

"Did they make you want to stay?"

"...Not really."

"Hehe. You never were good at telling lies."

Apparently, I was an open book for Margit to read. Diverting my embarrassed conscience, I dug into Polydeukes to tell him to pick up the pace. We'd set off later than expected, so we'd need to hurry if we wanted to find an inn by sunset.

"Truth be told," Margit said, "I've pondered the thought myself."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what would life be like if the two of us stayed in the canton?"

As it turned out, she'd considered the same things I had, imagining a future where we stayed in Konigstuhl and lived our idyllic countryside lives. I wasn't some wide-eyed youngin enamored with city living, so I had no mind to deny the happiness that such a lifestyle could provide. We surely could have been happy spending the rest of our days here.

But I'd chosen the thrill of adventure. Come to think of it, maybe this whole thing was just me dragging Margit along for the ride.

"Don't misunderstand me, though. I don't have any regrets about the promise we made together."

Yet she shut me down before I could even ask my tactless question. It was very strange: I was the one holding the reins, so why did it feel like she was the

one steering?

The poets of every era and every world sang about how men were ever destined to bend at the hands of women. Ah well; I supposed this was just how the world worked.

“Thank you, Margit.”

“You’re very welcome, Erich. Now then, how long will it be to the ends of all earth?”

“Hopefully we’ll make it there by summer.”

Carried on the rhythmical clopping of hooves, we put our hometown behind us for the faraway frontier. But hey, nostalgia didn’t weigh anything—holding onto our memories and what-ifs of Konigstuhl wouldn’t hurt a soul.

“Far to the west,” Margit mused. “I wonder what the edges of the Empire are like.”

“Looking forward to it?”

“I am. I truly am.”

Whatever feelings for home we carried with us, the vastness of the future was infinitely more expansive. Bad luck and unfairness would surely rear their heads along the way, but the path to a bright future was ours to pave.

All right, GM. Give me a new record sheet.

[Tips] Those leaving their home canton in search of work will be given a writ of identification that serves as proof of imperial citizenship. Having this writ makes it astronomically easier to find work in unknown lands within the nation.

Imperial citizenship can also be earned by twenty years of residence and taxable labor, or bought with thirty drachmae. Yet in any case, it is incredibly difficult for an unidentifiable person to gain trust in a new community.

Spring of the Fifteenth Year

Setting Transition

To travel the world is the work of heroes, and to imitate heroes is the work of adventurers; adventurers are quick to leave behind their old stomping grounds in search of something new.

Many are the reasons that could fuel such drastic change: personal (i.e. story-related) reasons, an awkward atmosphere in the current area (due to the wrongdoings of a previous campaign), or tantalizing rumors of a newly discovered land (as laid out in the latest supplement), to name a few.

Mensch were some of the squishiest organisms in this world's animal kingdom, but we had two things going for us. First, we were adaptable enough to survive from the polar north to the ends of the south so long as we changed our attire. Second, we could adapt pretty much any technological advancement to suit our physiques, if not just use them by default.

"Hup!" I yipped, kicking Castor's sides. My trusty steed was getting along in the years, but that didn't stop him from kicking off into a full gallop. As swift as ever, his pace was so fast that anyone less experienced than me would've been thrown right off.

"C-Can't you, wah—do something, ah, about the rocking?!"

"I'm already doing my best!"

I stood up on the raised stirrups—a so-called monkey crouch position—to lessen the load on Castor's back and, with any luck, to steady my hips in the air so Margit could stay stable on my back. This was killer on my glutes and lower back, but even the most optimal posture didn't exactly make for smooth riding. In my ear was a sound all but foreign to my ears: my childhood companion was clicking her tongue in frustration.

She'd missed. *The* Margit had missed.

Such was archery atop the saddle.

Going back to that earlier tidbit about the benefits of the mensch body, we had two arms and legs each and sat neatly at about the midpoint between the largest and smallest races. If anyone else ever invented something useful, the odds were good that we could just scale it up or down accordingly; most tools interfaced with an arm or leg, after all.

But perhaps our greatest stroke of luck was that we shared our general physical attributes with the pinnacles of ingenuity, those who'd dragged civilization in their wake since the dawn of man—the methuselah. As a rule, their long list of contributions to society could almost always be traced back to one of them thinking, "What a pain. Let me invent something to do it for me," and then doing just that. Naturally, the methuselah did not care about how convenient their solutions would be for other races, and tailored their creations to suit themselves.

And would you look at that—we frail, pitifully mortal mensch got to reap the rewards.

On the other hand, my friendly neighborhood arachne girl had a spider's body below the waist. Riding horses was a totally different process for her; rather, riding beasts of burden as a whole was just not suited to her body type.

Obviously, Margit had never needed to ride a horse before, and it followed that she had never shot a bow on horseback either. With a debuff like this, not even the expert huntress could boast total accuracy.

"How," she spat out as we bobbed up and down, "many does, ugh, this make?!"

"I dunno!"

"Are you, hngh—are you sure you aren't cursed?!"

"I don't remember, hup, doing anything to deserve a curse!"

Margit continued to cock her crossbow—one of the eastern ones I'd brought home—through her grumbling, but now that she mentioned it, maybe I *was* cursed. Particularly bad fortune counts, right?

Anyway, our situation didn't require any long-winded explanations: we'd been jumped by a gang of bandits.

We were out on the western reach of the Empire: relative to the rest of the continent, we were finally entering the westernmost corner. Only ten days away from the lovely town of Konigstuhl, we could hardly claim to have entered the frontier—in fact, we were closer to our urbanized state capital now than we'd been when setting off.

So why the hell were there marauders here?

Five men clad in mediocre gear were chasing us down on horseback. There had been six of them to begin with, but Margit had put one in the dirt earlier.

They'd looked blatantly dishonest from the word go: mercenaries at best, but more likely opportunistic bandits whenever they could get away with it. Most criminals didn't make crime their day job anyway, since the imperial patrols would have them skewered if they did.

These goons must've put a mark on us while we'd been feeding the Dioscuri: Castor and Polydeukes were quite the grand horses for a couple of young kids to own. The thought of a big payday for robbing a pair of brats must've been too tantalizing to ignore.

Looks like I miscalculated. The Overwhelming Grin and Oozing Gravitas traits I'd picked up only worked when I could Negotiate in the first place—they wouldn't help me ward off trouble from afar. Maybe I should've taken a permanent passive instead to avoid getting sized up by those out of sight.

But then again, that could very well make me scare honest, innocent folks for no reason. Once, when Sir Lambert had tried to help a child who'd scraped their knee get back up, they'd peed themselves in terror; I don't think my heart could take it if that happened to me. Dealing with the riffraff was *very* annoying, but such was the cost of looking like a good-natured fellow. That I could only have one or the other was disappointing and vexing.

Today's thugs had been tailing us from a distance for quite a while, and had pulled the trigger once we were on a less populous road. It was a simple job: take the horses and find someone to buy them without paperwork. Easy stuff. As for us, they'd bury us somewhere off the road and call it a day; it wasn't as if

anyone would notice we were missing in a world without instant messaging.

Unfortunately for them, we weren't just hapless children: we were fighting back. Margit was in charge of offense, while I focused on evasion and escape. I snaked around, simultaneously directing Polydeukes with a long lead. To give them credit, the bandits knew their stuff about horse-jacking; all their attacks were nonlethal—for the horses, at least.

A bad feeling washed over me, so I held the reins with just my right hand and used my left to draw Schutzwolfe. Of course, unsheathing my sword one-handed like this was preposterous, so I'd snuck in the use of a helping Hand in a way that looked natural. In one fluid motion, I drew my blade and cut down the lasso arcing toward us.

The sound of a firing crossbow rang out at the same time, but the number of enemies remained the same.

"Sorry!" I yelled. "Got in your way!"

"Not a problem!"

Me pulling out my sword had moved Margit mid-shot, since she was on my back. Our synergy still wasn't up to par: I needed to time my movements better around her.

"Besides..."

A mechanical click rang out. The crossbow took me ten seconds to load as an experienced user, but the marksman on my back had done it in an instant. This went beyond dexterity and into the realm of expert precision. Evidently, her shortbow skills transferred to the more mechanical instrument.

"...I'm, hah, getting the hang of it!"

The bowstring jolted forward with a crack, launching a bolt straight through the wrist of a crook who'd been whirling around a lasso. These crossbows could fire through plate metal; the man's hand flew straight off.

"Nice shot!"

"If only! I'd been aiming for his shoulder!"

Precise targets aside, we'd be perfectly fine if she could hit them at all. Our

enemies were starting to get the hint, and they'd begun to let up as they questioned whether it was worth the risk.

Alas, it was too little, too late. The next bolt was more accurate than the last, and the one after that even more accurate still. They'd chased us into a long stretch of flat ground so we wouldn't have cover to hide, but that decision was going to cost them.

The ability to judge one's prey was the hallmark of a good hunter. A faulty eye was ever prone to confusing a gently sleeping dog with a ravenous wolf.

Ah well. It wasn't like these fools would ever get a chance to learn their lesson.

[Tips] Ability check modifiers are the bonuses and penalties a player receives upon engaging in some action based on the difficulty of the task or the location it is being attempted in. Firing a crossbow prone on the ground and firing a crossbow on a shaky saddle are two completely different tests of skill.

Margit and I sat on the bed of an inn, facing one another.

Not in any saucy way, though. We were separated by the contents of our shared wallet dumped onto the sheets.

"One, two, three..."

Her cute voice slowly incremented as she sifted through the coins with her dainty fingers. Tonight's lodging would be ten assarii for the room, thirty more for a dinner for two, twenty for tomorrow's breakfast, and another twenty-five for a to-go lunch. We'd also rented a pail of hot water for five assarii, and tacked on another ten assarii's worth of options, like getting freshly laundered bedsheets for three.

For the horses, we'd gotten two spots in the stable with water and hay for forty assarii to take the day's total to a libra and forty. We'd paid in one silver coin and thirty copper ones; we were splurging a bit, to be sure, but that was a ludicrous sum for a single day.

Doing some basic math, we'd be burning at least eighty-four librae if the trip to Marsheim took two months. That was assuming we didn't have to stop anywhere or rush to restock at inopportune times.

We were best off steeling ourselves for the worst: two drachmae could realistically up and vanish by the time we reached our destination. I'd surely want to get my trusty horses reshod at some point with how long the journey was going to be, and we'd probably think of things we needed along the way, not to mention how we'd need to replace anything that broke.

It was no wonder people didn't leave their hometowns—or if they did, that they chose to camp outdoors. Shelling out a good chunk of an average family's yearly income on one trip was insanity.

That said, it wasn't as if we were broke enough to be counting pennies as we huddled around an empty wallet. We were better off than most, considering how it was common to find beginner parties sharing meals just to ward off starvation; I myself had played such roles many a time to great enjoyment.

I distinctly recalled when my friends and I had gone out of our way to blow all our cash on gear and consumables so we could walk around town talking about how broke we always were. Led by a priest, we'd dubbed ourselves the Mendicants and greeted every NPC with, "Good citizen, please... We haven't eaten in three days!" Looking back, that might've been going a bit far.

But that had been how we'd gotten our main quest: we'd marched off to fight powerful foes as repayment for the charitable soul who'd lodged us. And, upon completing the task, we'd gotten a little too into character and refused monetary compensation on the grounds that the bowls of porridge we'd received on empty stomachs had been worth more than the shiniest of coins...only to greet the next NPC we'd come across with "Good citizen, please... We haven't eaten in five days!" We'd all been riding the high of watching *Seven Samurai*, if I remembered right.

Ahem, I digress. Among the pile of coins between me and Margit were a few that gleamed proudly gold—and not the kind that were worth less than market value. Each piece was a fine mint worth a drachma or more.

"...and that makes five drachmae, forty-five librae, and thirty-two assarii,"

Margit announced as she completed her count. “Goodness me, it’s almost as if we’re rich.”

Her expression bore a mix of sarcasm and concern as she pinched a gold piece and flicked it into the air. It twirled over and over with a crisp jingle, sending the girl in profile on its face spinning at breakneck speeds. If I knew my money, that print could be traced back to Cornelius II the Merciful—or as he was more commonly known, Cornelius the Doting. As the name suggested, his name had become allegorical for how he’d pampered his daughter to the point of putting her face on the money instead of his own.

The history of the Doting Emperor’s coins notwithstanding, the gold was awfully clean for something we’d earned with blood.

“*Seven times*. Erich, would you care to tell me what this number means?”

“...Who’s to say?”



It wasn't every day that Margit glared at me like this, and I couldn't take it. Despite knowing the answer, I averted my gaze.

Seven...was the number of times we'd gotten into trouble since leaving home.

Today's ambush made four total bandit attacks. We'd noticed a wanted man at a pub—in pitifully poor disguise, might I add—and caught him for five. A deeply confused soul had mistaken us for horse thieves and pestered us to make six. Lastly, some moron gave me grief about having a sword on my belt, so I'd returned the favor until things escalated into a full-blown melee—bringing us to seven.

"All this in ten days. This isn't normal, is it?"

Don't ask like you don't know the answer, I conveyed with a wordless glance.

"Erich..." Margit let out a deep sigh. "Fortune has never been kind to you, but I hadn't known it was *this* bad."

"I-It's not *that*—"

"Remind me: did you ever, once, win a pouch of candy at the autumn festival?"

"...No."

She just *had* to go there. The autumn festival was an event that the magistrate put on for the people of the canton, and every year, he ran a raffle for all the children to take part in. A bunch of strings were set up, with some of them being tied to little bags, and the kids were free to keep whatever was attached to their chosen string—which, of course, could be nothing.

Enough rewards were prepared for two in three children to win a prize. From the day I'd been born to the day I'd left the canton, I had managed to hit the thirty-three percent chance to lose every time. Sure, there was only one bag with a silver piece every year, so landing that was too much to ask for, but it was genuinely absurd that I'd never gotten some pastries or cookies or *something*.

"Th-That's all in the past," I said. "Besides! It didn't matter, because you always shared with me."

“Aw, I do remember passing those little pouches back and forth. But the aftertaste of these coins isn’t quite as sweet as the candy, now is it?”

“But, uh, hey...at least we’re funding our journey?”

“Erich. I’m trying to say that I won’t last like this.”

I really did think we’d earned a good chunk of change. We’d passed off all the criminals alive, and the two most recent captures had already had warrants for their arrest, further boosting our reward. All in all, we’d made a lot of money.

Before leaving home, Margit and I had talked it out and decided that we were going to split our finances down the middle. Half of our income would go into our shared wallet, and the other half would be split again for each of us to take as a personal allowance—which was to say, this wasn’t even all of what we’d earned. In ten short days, we’d put together more money by turning in criminals than I’d gotten for winning that dueling tournament back in fall.

Gods, what a bloody road this was. Whose fault was this, anyway?

“Do you appreciate how astonishingly improbable this is? We aren’t even in the borderlands yet, and we’re encountering bandits at every turn.”

“Well... I think part of that is because we look a little wealthy.”

“Even so, it’s too much. I shouldn’t need to question whether the God of Trials has blessed you or not.”

Her complaint was so justified that I would’ve groveled in shame on the spot, had it meant anything in imperial culture. But in my defense, I wasn’t doing it on purpose. I wasn’t some Sengoku-era general praying to the moon for more masochistic challenges to overcome.

In fact, I’d been exceptionally careful *not* to accidentally offer my prayers to the God of Trials. I knew He was the type to bestow tests on those who showed promise, and that worshiping Him would only bring *more* tribulations into my life. Any time I’d seen one of His temples, I’d turned a blind eye.

I’d done everything right. How had things turned out this way?

“In any case, I’ve had my fill of trouble, and we’ve earned more than enough for our travels. Much, much more. It isn’t as if we’re trying to stay in first-rate

inns the whole way there.”

“Uh... Yeah. You’re right.”

“So, I have a proposition.” Margit raised one finger and attempted to reason with me. “It may delay our arrival, but I think we should find a westbound caravan to accompany.”

To begin with, my eagerness to get us on the road west to Ende Erde the moment spring rolled in had led me to *sorely* mistime things if we wanted to convoy up. In the spring there was no shortage of westbound merchants eager to follow the long circuit through the borderlands, filling their purses with the coin of frontier folk who’d spent all winter cooped up and now found themselves in dire need of supplies and entertainment—but we were *ahead of them*. Most of the traffic we’d encountered was from smaller border merchants following similar opportunities closer to home opened up by the thaw.

So okay, there had been a few convoys we’d crossed paths with, but they’d invariably been on their way to peddle their wares at other nearby cantons, and the constant stops would’ve ground our pace to a halt; not to mention that all of them had set their final destination toward nearby cities, meaning we’d be taking a detour for a very short stint of company.

Unable to find any other traveling groups to ride with, we’d been forced to head off with just the two of us, my weariness with camping be damned. I honestly couldn’t tell if we’d been too picky or if the world was just toying with us.

“First, I’d like for us to stop by a city. Surely we’ll find at least one company heading for the frontier there.”

“That’s true. Merchants heading abroad are probably setting off around now so they can spend their whole year being productive.”

I couldn’t tell what she was thinking behind those big amber eyes, but there was something to her gaze that wouldn’t let me say no.

“Then it’s settled. We’ll start looking around tomorrow—our first order of business will be finding someone headed toward a big city.”

“Sure. Sounds good...”

Luckily for us, there was a middling city just a few days away on horseback. If we could find a merchant caravan on their way back to resupply after selling out at a nearby canton, they'd show us the way for a small fee and we'd be able to enjoy a relatively safe trip there.

But, to be honest...ignoring all the incidents, traveling with Margit hadn't been bad. I could trust her to watch my back, and I'd finally gotten to enjoy the romantic thrill of adventure. I knew that our safety came first, but, well, it felt like a shame to give up on this when it was just getting good.

"Oh, please don't make that face." Having read my mind, Margit scooted over and grabbed me by both cheeks. Then, without warning, she pinched them up into a forced smile. "You aren't the only one who's disappointed, you know."

Oh, come on, that's so *unfair.* I was never, ever going to be able to say no to her.

"Bear with me," she said. "If things continue as they are now day in and day out, I'm afraid I'll grow sick of it."

"...Okay. As you wish, ma'am."

"Aw. I do love it when you're a good boy."

Once I gave in, she began to squish my face with a mischievous smile. I tried to get away by falling backward onto the bed, but the arachne leapt forward as jumping spiders do and landed with me, square on my stomach.

Finding a caravan, huh? Tomorrow's going to be an early day...

[Tips] Caravans are the result of merchants herding together. Sometimes, the whole group will belong to one company, but others can be comprised of several smaller entities banding together.

Early Summer of the Fifteenth Year

NPC Adventurers

Adventurers are not irreplaceable or unique—the field is teeming with competition. Whether a PC befriends those around them in search of better work or antagonizes them to protect the quests they've been given is the player's choice.

Similarly, the responsibility of dealing with a shady friend or becoming a social pariah also rests with the player.

Darkness began to settle in on the road. A short ways off the main highway, we were setting up camp in a campground that had been neatly cleared out for merchants and travelers.

And by "we," I meant the caravan we'd cast our lot with. Up went tents and smoke as our company prepared to see through the night.

"Heya, Erich. Hard at work, huh?"

"Boy, you're quick. Thanks for the flame!"

"Keep up the good work, pal."

After I'd set up and lit a campfire, a diverse smattering of mercenaries swung by to light their own torches and lanterns, each then wandering off to patrol the perimeter.

As for me, I was just a traveler who'd paid a small fee to join the group's ranks. A caravan's strength lay in numbers; since every additional member lent security to the rest of the group, last-minute additions were generally accepted without issue.

If there were too many of us to kill at once, *someone* would end up fighting back: whether bandit or beast, no one was dumb enough to attack if the threat of a counterattack was plain to see. Plus, having more hands to help when

problems arose was always welcome, as were the shorter shifts on night watch when there were more people to share the load. Yet perhaps the greatest benefit of all was that our collective dues could be put toward hiring a reputable gang of mercenaries without the organizers burning through all their funds.

Manpower really, truly did solve just about any problem.

The convoy we'd joined was one that, when factoring in all the merchants and guards, numbered a hundred strong. Margit's hunch had been right: a quick trip to the city had been all it took to find intrepid entrepreneurs venturing into distant lands in place of the cheapskate salespeople making their rounds of the cantons. The magnitude of this international corporation was made evident when one considered that the average domestic caravan was composed of thirty-odd people on average.

Of course, a company like this one attracted tons of people who wanted to enjoy safer travels. As a result, membership came with a steep price tag attached. Although we had the funds to pay upfront, we were commoners at heart: instead, we'd struck a deal to help with miscellaneous chores during the journey to get a discount. Besides, I'd known all too well that paying a few drachmae for the privilege of doing nothing would just see me getting antsy in a few days' time.

Once more, I found myself a menial servant.

And, as servants so often were, I was busy. I cared for the scouts' horses and the donkeys hauling cargo, made campfires for the cooks, and washed the laundry. There was a lot to do, but I secretly handled all my chores with magic, and I was well regarded within the community for my fast work.

As I should have been. I'd been working earnestly for a month now, and my labor was fit to serve a count.

Tinderbox in hand, I pretended to light a fire naturally. At this point, a mage would need to be right next to me to even notice; anyone watching from a distance would have no clue I was using magic. But in a few short minutes, I'd started another healthy campfire—with how big the caravan was, I had to set up a lot of them every day.

As I continued about my business, the smell of supper began to fill the air. The usual dried rations and wild vegetables that made up a normal on-the-road diet ended up becoming tasty meals here, thanks to the head merchant's decision to bring a proper cook along.

Looking back, this past month had been the epitome of peace. No bandits, no horse thieves, and thanks to how professional the caravan's leadership was, no stupid fights. The bodyguards all belonged to a mercenary band that was exclusively employed by the group's organizer, and none of them caused any trouble; if nothing else, I didn't have to worry about them picking a fight with me when I was a paying guest.

I really, seriously should've done this from the beginning. Adventure was great, but I wasn't some kind of battle junkie constantly looking for a fight.

"Hey, Erich! Come lend me a hand if you're free!"

"Oh, yes sir! Just one moment!"

Once I finished setting my last campfire, the cook waved me over. The hulking orc had been getting the head merchant's assistants to help him prepare meals before, but he'd recently taken a liking to me after seeing me prepare meat and vegetables once.

According to him, most people didn't know how to handle a cooking knife. The other day, he'd been grumbling about how the ingredients wouldn't cook properly if they were different sizes, and how sloppy cutting ruined the texture. Mind you, he'd said this while stirring a pot of stew that included anything we could get our hands on—but I supposed he knew his stuff, considering how that mystery stew always ended up tasting good.

"You know, kid..."

The man looked over as I casually peeled some turnips. I noticed that he was doing the same and, despite not looking at his hands, was keeping the outer peeled layer perfectly thin. Considering his skill, I imagined he must've trained at a well-known kitchen to get this job cooking for a caravan this big.

"You sure are good at this," he said. "You ever apprentice under a chef?"

"No, but I used to be an indentured servant in the capital. If I seem capable,

it’s probably because I’d been made to do anything and everything that I possibly could.”

Though I wasn’t hiding my real name this time, I *was* hiding my connection to the nobility. Sharing that information wasn’t going to do me any favors: the people here had chosen to use their skills for a life of self-sufficiency. At best, I could expect a clicked tongue for my trouble of telling them I’d curried favor with the privileged.

“A servant, eh? Coulda fooled me. I woulda thought you’d been training to be a cook too with how you handle a knife. Most rookies get all cut up when you put ’em in the dark with nothing but a fire, but look at you, peeling that thing like a champ.”

“Well, practice makes perfect. And when it comes to chores...I’ve had a *lot* of practice.”

With Divine Favor in Dexterity, I could peel vegetables with my eyes closed. Honestly, it was so easy that sometimes I made a game of trying to peel the whole thing in one go or slicing off as thin a layer as I could; but that also meant that my skill wasn’t so impressive that a servant backstory would raise any eyebrows. The caravan had given us a serious discount, so I was happy to be able to return the favor by doing my best—this was nothing in exchange for having a safe place to sleep.

“I had to take care of myself back then, and I’d learned a bit about cooking along the way. Just enough to make porridge on the road that people won’t spit out, that is.”

“C’mon Erich, don’t be so humble. Kids your age are cuter with a chip on their shoulder, yeah?”

“Ha, I’ll keep that in mind.”

I wasn’t trying to be humble: my skills genuinely weren’t anything of note compared to his—the guy made killer grub. Part of that came from the luxury of having several carriages dedicated to holding food, but the quality of his ingredients was by no means the only factor. He was constantly on the lookout to see how tired people were or what the weather was like to come up with the perfect dish on any given day, and had the chops to turn his ideas into reality.

My cooking was closer to following a recipe and letting my blessing do the rest. It had gotten good reviews out of Dietrich, but I wasn't under the impression that I was good enough to make this my job.

"Hey, kid. You wanna help season the dishes?"

"Huh? Can I, really?"

"Sure. The more people I get cooking, the less pots I gotta handle myself."

"I'd love to!"

The offer was surprising, but welcome. Learning from others decreased the cost of skill acquisition significantly, and I would never turn down the knowledge of how to make tasty meals in the middle of nowhere. I was sure Margit would appreciate me learning from an outdoor cooking veteran too.

You know, meeting new people and talking to them wasn't all bad after all. It wasn't all fights and bloodshed: there were fun opportunities to be had.

"Aight, let's get this over with then. Don't want the guards coming over to graze before we can get to the *real* work."

"Sure thing. I'll pick up the pace."

I peeled, cut, and bored the bad chunks out of vegetables for another hour or so. My fingers were so soaked in their juices by the time we finished that I began reminiscing about the convenient rubber gloves we'd had back on Earth.

With the prepping done, I ran from pot to pot and seasoned the dishes as per the chef's instructions. Someone had sniped a bird today, and dinner was looking like it'd soak nicely into black bread.

"Okay, that about does it. The flavor changes depending on what part of the guts you throw in, so I always take a bite raw before I—ah, wait. Mensch get stomachaches when you eat raw meat, huh?"

"Unfortunately, yes. That would arguably be the best-case scenario."

Orcish digestive systems were incomparably sturdier than ours. Their stomach acid was said to be potent enough to kill bacteria and parasites before they could settle in. I would not be following his example on this front: orcs could drink raw bat blood without a care in the world, and copying their eating habits

was a death wish.

“My bad, pal. You’ll have to save the taste test for after it’s done, I guess. It’ll be a lot more trial and error, but you’ll figure it out.”

“That’s fine by me. I’d rather not destroy my stomach, so I’ll leave the pre-cooking calibrations to the masters. Taking it one step at a time is perfect for an ordinary person like me.”

“What’d I say about being humble? Ah, whatever—just do your best, kid. C’mon, I’m gonna go put on the finishing touches, so watch carefully.”

“Yes sir!”

We made the rounds to each of the bubbling pots, and the man taught me what herbs and spices ought to be used for what flavors. The fun learning experience was followed by a busy period of serving portions, cleaning up, and washing dishes—these sorts of campgrounds were almost always by rivers—until my work was done and I looked up to see the moon hanging high above my head. The Mother Goddess was barely present tonight, Her light faint; meanwhile the Fasle Moon approached its fullest form, like a slice of the abyss carved out of the night sky.

I averted my gaze from the pull of darkness and stretched. Moving my back felt great after crouching down to wash dishes for so long. Doing good work that used my body always felt rewarding.

Back in my old world, I would spend moments like these with a can of coffee and a cigarette; sadly, the Empire had no coffee beans, let alone vending machines, and I’d have to settle for just the smoke. With all the fellow reincarnators that had left their mark on this world’s history, you’d think one of them would’ve ventured off to find a new continent with coffee already. Red tea wasn’t bad, but I couldn’t forget the bitter hit of caffeine that came with a good brew. Alas, just as those who’d never had tonkatsu would never crave it, I would have to bear this suffering alone.

I let out a puff of smoke. Invigorated by the False Moon, a couple of nameless fairies flew by, but I waved them away and headed back to camp. Most folks were setting up their tents, but some of the poorer travelers had laid out their sleeping bags right next to the open fires. I walked by them all and slipped into

the sturdy roofed carriage that we'd been assigned to find a small bundle of blankets on the floor.

"Margit, wake up."

That bundle of blankets was, more precisely, my partner from Konigstuhl.

"Mmn... Mm?"

I gently rocked what I thought to be her shoulder, and I could catch a glimpse of her face scrunching up. She let out an annoyed mumble like a kitten being woken from a pleasant nap, but then opened her hazel eyes and got up.

Wiping the sleepy tears in the corners of her eyes, she shed the veil of blankets and stretched. Despite having a spider's lower half, her form was strikingly feline: watching her bend forward and straighten out to the tip of her butt reminded me of the outdoor cats I'd sometimes played with in Berylin.

"Good morning, Erich. Is it that time already?"

"Yeah. I have your dinner here. It's still warm, so feel free to take your time."

Shaking off the drowsiness, Margit straightened herself out and accepted the magically warmed plate of food.

Make no mistake: she hadn't been sleeping for lack of things to do. Rather, it was precisely because she had an important job in the coming hours that she'd been given the chance to rest up early.

Nearly all types of arachne had some form of Darkvision. Equipped to work well in lightless forests, their sight was good enough to make out text with only the light of a new moon: they were the perfect midnight lookouts.

In particular, Margit's sensory prowess as a huntsman had netted her the role of keeping watch. Other than that, she also went hunting in nearby forests while the rest of us were setting up camp—a common way of lowering the total cost of food—to earn her keep as a member of the caravan. From each according to their ability: Margit was too small to help lift heavy cargo, and it would've been a waste of her skillset to have her do miscellaneous chores. Just as I was well regarded as a handyman, she was doing well as a lookout at night.

I worked at noon and sunset, but had her protect me at night; she dozed off

on my lap when we were on the road but had a job to do once the stars were up. This would probably be how we'd be even after we became adventurers.

"I can only hope tonight will be another quiet night," Margit said.

"Yeah," I agreed. "I'll pray that nothing happens."

"Worry not. Even if something does, I won't let anyone bother you in your sleep."

After finishing her tasty mystery stew, she donned an arachne hunting outfit designed to blend into the night and hopped off the wagon without a sound. The mercenaries were patrolling the perimeter, but she was to join a few others keeping watch around the camp in case anyone slipped through the cracks.

Once I'd seen her off, I threw on the still-warm blanket and got ready to sleep myself. The floor of this buggy was harder than the beds of an inn, but it was still many times more comfortable than the ground. Besides, this was good practice for the future: everyone knew the best adventurers were the ones who could fall asleep anywhere.

[Tips] No matter what skills or traits are taken, there are some racial bonuses that cannot be replicated. For example, mensch can never fly with their bodies alone, nor can they stay submerged in water forever.

The classy buzz of a metal string rang out until the cool of night soaked it away.

"Tonight, I shall tell you the tale of a hero—he who has captured the hearts of those in the western lands."

A low, sonorous voice joined in atop the clear sound of his lap-harp. As might be obvious from its name, the instrument was a stringed one that rested in his lap. It had a flat, oblong surface with five strings of varying thickness running across it; a mechanical contraption sat above, letting the player press down on the strings with a series of keys. Many solo minstrels considered it their instrument of choice: it had a small footprint, offered variety in sound even when played one-handed, and required minimal movement so as not to distract

from the song it accompanied.

Tonight, one poet was putting on a show for the people of the caravan. In part, this was a way of keeping us all from getting too bored; but for the performer, this was his way of keeping his skills sharp on the long journey.

The allure of entertainment had gathered a decent number of people around the fire, and Margit and I were part of the crowd. We were both off duty tonight, and I'd always wanted to listen to an epic around a dark campfire.

Although my travels had taken me all over, I'd never gotten to enjoy a moment that epitomized road trip life quite like this. Lady Agrippina was never going to listen to some two-bit minstrel, and my personal journeys had all been without much company.

Three long years later, I was finally on an adventure that was properly *adventurous!* The performance hadn't even begun yet, and I was already getting emotional—but perhaps not as emotional as the minstrel was as he struck the strings and began weaving the tale.

"To the west lay the ends of all earth, but the story begins further west still: the gateway to oblivion, Marsheim. Built in a day was its castle, upon the neverending springs of its mother river the Mauser."

The man strummed his instrument and played with its keys, creating the aural image of a gentle river flowing into the opening act.

In a funny twist, the scene of the story was the very same Marsheim that we were headed for now. That said, I'd heard that traveling poets researched the lands they planned to visit and chose their setlists accordingly. It went without saying that a hometown hero's tale would get good reactions, so this was a natural choice for someone who was fishing for tips.

Composition wasn't exactly a widely marketable business in this world, so this probably wasn't the minstrel's original work. But on the other hand, that meant this was a piece that he'd enjoyed enough to consider adding to his own repertoire—I was really starting to get excited.

"From the glorious waterway come her daughters, each a lifeline for the humble villages on their banks. It is here that we find our young hero—heed!

See him clad in armor and be awed, for the holy crest of dawn adorns his chest. The hero Fidelio stands proud, ready to dispel all darkness as the first rays of daylight do."

Tonight's heroic saga covered a trope as difficult to use as it was well-known: the slaying of an evil dragon. Because evil dragons were so timeworn, even in the Empire, establishing a modern hero with such a feat was a storytelling challenge. The royal road had been thoroughly paved by the classics, and any slip-up in the details could send a story tumbling down the beaten path of cliche.

Yet either thanks to our performer's or the original writer's talents—or perhaps the real life deeds of whoever had inspired the tale—nothing stuck out as particularly trite.

The story followed Fidelio, a lay priest—a devout believer who refused to affiliate with any given parish—of the Sun God. One day, he wandered into a small canton, where the kind villagers housed and fed him for a night. Eager to repay his debts, he agreed to slay the limbless drake that had been terrorizing the people of the region.

However, this was no hackneyed tale content to stick to formulaic dragon slaying or a beat-for-beat Prince Charming romance. Enraged by the magistrate's callous lack of action thus far, the man broke the mold by first marching to the local lord's manor in furious protest.

"'Answer me! Is the collection of taxes your sole duty as a noble?! Choose your words wisely, for my pact with God demands I right injustice apparent!'"

Although the clergy of the Empire tended not to insert themselves into politics, they were known to try and solve the problems of common people...to an extent. No one would ever dare kick down a magistrate's front door and lecture a noble to their face. While I was sure the story was being embellished for dramatic effect, the courage needed to petition the magistrate directly was already more than impressive.

But the magistrate wanted nothing to do with the insolent priest. So, Fidelio proposed a deal: he would slay the dragon and, in exchange, the lord would have no say in whatever he did next to help the people of the canton.

Scoffing at the priest's arrogance, the magistrate told him he was free to get himself eaten if he so wished.

Truth be told, this was a reasonable response.

Limbless drakes were one of the weakest types of dragons and had extremely limited intelligence. As the name suggested, they had no limbs: they'd evolved away from their brethren's trademark wings and gargantuan legs to become giant snakes who burrowed in the earth like worms. Despite being classified as dragons, they were so inferior that true dragons seemed not to register them as kindred beings...and yet they were *still* living calamities by human standards.

Designed to plow through soil, their outer scales were thick, powerful, and fashioned into a unique file-like pattern. They had huge jaws mainly to scarf down dirt while they drilled, but their mouths were lined with razored, lampreylike teeth. Once fully mature, they were at *least* three meters in diameter—more than big enough to swallow a grown man whole.

Worse still, their length was made to match their girth: what they'd lost in limb mass, they made up for by being *dozens* of meters long. In the old divine myths (which were understood to be close to historical fact), there was said to have been one specimen that could coil seize an entire *mountain* in its coils.

Whether the Father God had blessed him or not, a lone priest taking on an opponent like that was ridiculous. Anyone in the magistrate's position would have laughed.

But the fearless Fidelio laughed right back, declaring that God suffers no liars. Suddenly, the Sun God's blessing came beaming down from the heavens: the holy Father presided over matters of contract, and He had made their deal absolute.

The magistrate began to quake. Being a bureaucrat, he knew all too well that the Sun God only entrusted His powers of arbitration to pastors at the very least—that is to say, priests acknowledged to be worthy of leading others.

Reality sank in: Fidelio was no fool spouting nonsense. He was an exemplar of virtue on a mission to deliver justice.

"The drake squirms, it writhes, it thrashes across the river! O, the horror! For

every twitch of its muddied scales bids the river's banks to crumble; the crystal waters run dark as the rotting shells of eaten fish fly forth in a storm of pestilence! The hideous beast knows nothing of man's toil: levees generations in the making, erased in but an instant!"

Told over an ominous low drone, the description drew out a few terrified yelps from children in the crowd. The adults holding their hands tight likely hailed from a riverside town. Coming from a village on the plains, the fear of a broken embankment was difficult to internalize for me, but it was a chilling thought for those who knew its true horrors.

"Yet one man stands tall against the master of this blighted river! Fidelio gazes down from his hill; his shining helmet comes down and his magnificent spear rises up as he offers the battle to his god! Prayer on his tongue, he lunges, piercing the water's surface—the darkened sludge boils at once, forcing the foul creature to the air!"

Thinking rationally, one might be tempted to ask how the hell an entire river instantaneously began to boil, or otherwise question why boiling water would even bother a thick-skinned dragon. Yet disbelief was easily suspended when divine miracles came into play.

For a deity as powerful as the Sun God, selectively boiling a massive body of water in order to bring pain to the unjust was within reason. That was the might of the heavens: the whole point of a miracle lay in turning the impossible into the possible.

Once the serpent was forced ashore, Fidelio faced it in a battle so fierce that it reshaped the land. The dragon chomped at him, swallowing the earth with every bite; he stabbed it again and again with a spear burning with solar heat.

The beast thrashed its gargantuan body every which way, kicking up a storm of rocks and flailing hard enough to send its scales flying. Yet no matter how many times he was beaten down, no matter how much blood he spilled, Fidelio continued to swing his spear; every bead of red became a burning droplet of the sun's fury, and he rose more surely than the first light of morning.

The plot was gripping, but what had captured me even more was the man's fighting style, fueled by blessings I hadn't so much as heard of. From what I

could gather, this wasn't pure exaggeration for the sake of an exciting story—the details were too fleshed out for that. It sounded more like someone had witnessed the battle firsthand and retold the story to the eventual author.

Fiery daylight that burned only the evil, self-healing to rival the cyclical sunrise, and the ability to turn one's spilt blood into a weapon... Put to gaming terms, he was a maxed out, multi-action battle monk—the guy was a *freak*.

Battle monks were scary, man. They could handle their buffs and healing on their own, all while beating the daylights out of anything that crossed their paths. It wasn't even worth asking what made them strong: their brains were on average about one-hundred-twenty percent muscle anyway, so the answer was that they were just strong. Armored up, the bulky maniacs could eat magic to the face and shrug it off, only to run over enemy front liners like walking tanks. As if that weren't enough, they healed themselves and their squishy allies, all while using their minor actions to cleanse debuffs.

Builds like these were so hard to kill in a fair fight that balancing around them made games impossible for weaker combatants; but going too easy would mean letting the whole campaign get body checked by unspeakable holy violence. A min-maxed battle monk was a terror for GMs everywhere.

From what I could gather, Fidelio was one of them. I got goosebumps just thinking about what he could do with a strong back line, or even a front liner who could cover for his blind spots.

The data munchkin in my heart was smitten, but to tell the truth, it wasn't for me. There were no tricks to his build: he was just brutally strong. Personally, I was more interested in putting together something clever—not to say I'd ever complain about having an ally like that, of course.

"There certainly are some amazing people out there," Margit whispered to me. "To think someone would hunt a drake all by himself."

"There really are," I whispered back. "You know, I look up to people like him, but what about you? Do you ever think about being that strong?"

"I intend on remaining human, thank you. I don't have any plans to do anything that outrageous."

The melodious story went on, detailing how Fidelio's struggle lasted for half a day. After hours of fighting, his spear snapped in two; disarmed, the hero jumped into the monster's mouth and tore its jaw open with his bare hands to end the battle. This part was pretty plainly overstated...I hoped. Could someone please confirm that it was?

Because if not, Margit was right: the man was categorically inhuman. So much so that I bet he could throw hands with Lady Agrippina.

I mean, I'd sworn to myself that I'd make that scoundrel cry uncle, but...could I really ever be *that* broken? I could imagine taking down a drake with a competent party and some smart strategy, but bare-handing one by myself was a bit much.

"Besides," Margit said, "I'd much rather achieve something with the two of us than hone my skills alone. Isn't that why we set out together in the first place?"

"Yeah, you're right. *We'll* do great things—together."

There was a certain romance to conquering trials all by oneself, but the whole reason we found ourselves here at all was because of the girl looking up at me from my lap. We had no need to push ourselves past the bounds of reason.

It was best to take things one step at a time. I may have "completed" a portion of my build, but I still only had one Scale IX each in a stat and skill. Letting this story of an absurdly strong hero get to my head was sure to spell bad news; I took a moment to reel in my expectations.

Haste makes waste; the shortest path is hidden along detours.

"But you know," I said, "I *do* want to hunt a real dragon one day."

"...I wouldn't leave you on your own if you set off to do so, but even *I* have my reservations about following you on a dragon hunt."

That bad? Come on, everyone dreams of slaying a dragon at some point, right? In my past life, dragon-slaying had been so prevalent that the legendary monsters had ironically been reduced to a bunch of jobbers.

I cocked my head, confused as to why Margit seemed so uneager; meanwhile, the minstrel's tale reached its conclusion.

With the terrible dragon slain, the clever Fidelio took its valuable corpse not to the magistrate, but to the viscount that the magistrate swore fealty to. There, he explained the cruel fate that had befallen the canton's citizens and asked that the viscount help them rebuild.

The magistrate's actions had been outright criminal negligence, and their divine pact forbade him from getting a word in edgewise. And while going straight to an aristocrat's superior was a major faux pas, the priest's heroics were too great to ignore.

Moved by Fidelio's bravery, the viscount accepted all the terms laid out: the canton would enjoy ten years of tax exemption and receive help rebuilding their levees. As for the magistrate who'd been collecting sixty percent of his citizens' yields—the most draconian rate technically allowed by imperial law—while sitting on his ass, he was promptly fired.

Fidelio, meanwhile, was recognized as a proper saint for his efforts, and everyone lived happily ever after. As the story neatly tied up, I reached into my pocket to hand the musician a copper piece with just one thought on my mind: *I hope they'll sing songs like this about me one day.*

[Tips] Limbless drakes are the most primitive of all drakes, but the threat they pose to society is undeniably draconic. Left to their own devices, they can devour mountains' worth of precious metal or cause tremendous flooding by eroding river foundations. As such, sightings are commonly met with the mobilization of troops.

I was a luckless man, and that lucklessness bred mistrust. No matter how peaceful things got, I was always preparing myself for the next cataclysm.

Would it be a massive bandit clan, big enough to target a hundred-person caravan? Or maybe a sudden mutiny would break out. Perhaps we'd be stopped and frisked at a border checkpoint by a corrupt magistrate's men. In the worst case, a dragon might suddenly appear out of nowhere!

Fate was a comical thing, entirely dependent on the mood of a pair of clattering cubes or a single twenty-sided die. I couldn't count how many times

I'd been trampled over by an unfair encounter only to reincarnate as someone else who conveniently shared my name and abilities.

So I was ready. Ready for anything. And finally...

"It really is a shame to see you go. There's a place for you if you just say the word, you know. It isn't every day that our crabby chef gets along with someone."

"And everyone here appreciates how hard you two work. In fact, we'd be happy to welcome you both to the main branch of our store. Are you sure you don't want to come with us? Couples don't have to live in-house, even as trainees!"

...We'd made it to our destination without a single road event going awry.

I felt, uh, weird. Like something was missing, almost. But I was also relieved? Yet I felt like I needed to grab ahold of someone and ask, "Aren't you forgetting something?"

No, no, no—I knew that this was normal. I hadn't gone far enough off the rails to think that my childhood under Lady Agrippina was anything less than insane.

Still, it was a strange feeling to be seen off by the mister and missus running the caravan like this, not to mention all the others who'd treated us well all this way.

"Thank you very much for the offer," I said. "But, well..."

"...This is a dream we've shared since childhood," Margit completed. "Isn't that right?"

The floresiensis couple who'd founded the caravan were nice and hardworking; they held our hands and practically begged us to stay. For any other common kid, this would've been a dream scenario. They were the main traders for a large pottery company based in a state capital city. From here, they planned to continue west past the imperial border, past the Kingdom of Seine, out to the Pyrenian Union bordering the Emerald Sea.

Pyrenia produced unique earthenware with a lot of foreign influence in style, and the merchant couple were evidently wanting for dependable help.

Transporting fragile cargo was a tremendous undertaking—a shocking amount of the cargo they'd brought with them to sell had already cracked—and having trustworthy workers would make the long trip home much easier.

A grand expedition that unfolded across two major nations did sound like a healthy source of excitement. Being surrounded by unfamiliar tongues, seeing foreign technologies, and enjoying exotic foods was sure to make for a wonderful adventure.

Alas, it wasn't quite what I had in mind.

We politely apologized and refused their offer before collecting our things and saying our goodbyes. Over the course of the last two months, the familiar faces of the group had become our friends; even the Dioscuri seemed to be saying farewell to the horses they'd shared the road with.

Looking back, this was the calmest my life had been since my uneventful days in Konigstuhl as a little kid. Servitude in the capital hadn't been constant action, per se, but the work had kept me a lot busier.

I wonder if we'll find this kind of peace again.

After splitting off at a fork in the road, Margit and I waited until the last member of the convoy was finally out of sight. They were planning to skip Marsheim and go straight for the border, so this was where we parted ways.

My mind felt crystal clear as I saw off our traveling company. The turn we'd stopped at was on a small hill, so I hurried up it to take in the view expanding before me.

At the peak, I was greeted by an ocean of green fields and a lush, unmaintained forest. Between them stood a city surrounded by towering walls. Here lay the ends of all earth: the city of Marsheim, capital of the westernmost state of the same name.

Small though it was, the sturdy castle at the city's center served as a proud landmark. It carried an air of impenetrability, bolstered by its sister forts off in the distant mountain range.

The city walls were similarly impressive: they were thick, tall, and had mystic barriers strong enough to see from afar. Its make had all the hallmarks of the

School of Polar Night and its monomaniacal fixation on refuting magic, as if it were an architectural declaration that no spell would pass.

Faced with these defenses, I could finally believe the old legends about how eight thousand troops had fended off an army of fifty thousand.

Famed as both the beating heart of the Empire's western defenses and the gateway into the satellites beyond, Marsheim was a bustling city. One look at the billowing plumes of smoke rising up were enough to gauge its thriving economy—fuel was often the first thing to be cut when times got tough.

But perhaps more illustrative was the amount of traffic going in and out. Of the four main gates, three were teeming with activity: I spotted both personal traders hauling their own luggage and bigger companies with multiple wagons of cargo. On top of that, the Mauser River that ran to the city's north was filled with ships going to and fro.

Fortune lives but in the land of yonder—it was as if the old maxim had come to life. Just thinking that I was about to *go there* had me quivering in excitement.

Berylin had been a glorious city, to be sure, but it had been a statesman's glory—a polished work of political art. It had been carefully planned out to have everything it needed and nothing more, with every extra edge sanded down.

Built to exemplify the nation's ideals, the prosperity of the capital was a calculated exercise in splendor that felt like a sterilized version of true urban busyness. Defined by pure pragmatism, the meticulously laid out design left no room for anything outside the creators' initial intentions.

Except for the College.

Magus in-jokes aside, the leisurely city of Marsheim subscribed to a different notion of luster. They'd built a wall in a place rife with potential, filled it with the bare minimum to not break down, and let the people figure out the rest. This relatively laissez-faire approach had given rise to harsher competition, and a desperate vitality pervaded the town; a shop making money hand over fist today could go under by tomorrow.

"Someone's having fun."

I'd frozen in my tracks, sucked up by the city's atmosphere, until Margit pulled me back to reality. If she hadn't hopped on my back as she always did, I would've probably been stuck staring here until my legs gave out.

"Hee hee," she laughed, "a painting of fruits may look tantalizingly sweet, but it won't fill your stomach. I don't think we'll be able to see the city for what it is from so far away."

"I know," I said, my tone a bit pouty. I'd already given up on being in the saddle when I was with her, but looking like a dolt still embarrassed me.

But I couldn't help it. No matter how old a man got, deep down he was just a boy who'd learned to act like an adult. How was I supposed to hold myself back when looking out at a sight like this?

"Shall we? To our new home."

"...Yeah!"

My childhood companion knew me all too well. She nudged me along to let myself loose with a smile and the unspoken pledge that she'd be watching over me.

I figured that it was too late to feel ashamed now. I was nearing fifty inside, but I had the body of a fifteen-year-old—no one could blame me for enjoying myself like any other kid.

Grabbing my horses, I ran down the slope toward a new land of adventure.

[Tips] The westernmost lands of the Empire are oftentimes referred to as "Ende Erde," or "the ends of all earth." Unlike the rest of the nation, the oversight of the region is lax, and even the area surrounding the state's capital isn't considered completely safe.

However, the lenient regulations also facilitate easier business, and it is said that there is no better place for the penniless to find success. The liberties enjoyed in the region are well known, to the point of having inspired a popular folk tune: *I walked into Marsheim with the clothes on my back, and rode into Berylin with a filled money-sack.*

I thought to myself that the whole city of Marsheim looked like a terrace farm.

Those farms were constructed in steps along hillsides, sort of like a drawer with its bottom compartments pulled out, each one above pulled out incrementally less than the one before. Marsheim, meanwhile, revolved around a castle on a hill, with several layers of walls erected around it. Following the uneven geometry, tall stone semi-circles—none perfectly round or regular—rippled out from the center, giving it the same general visual feel when seen from above.

The city's history was palpable in its design. Embroiled in petty skirmishes since its conception, these lands had been kept well-fed with blood even after the Empire's founding led to a major city being planted here.

In other words, this had very recently been an active war zone, and would become one again if relations with our western neighbors ever broke down. History books spoke of the horrors that abounded while the rest of the nation enjoyed peace: cities were burned, cantons were abandoned, the earth was salted, and at times, magia came to poison the lands whole. There were few records of Ende Erde that took place in times of peace, even relative to the Empire's bloody history. With all the violence that had plagued this region, I could understand why we'd come to consider this the ends of all earth.

Funnily enough, though, the city down in the distance wasn't actually as old as these historical tales would suggest. The citadel at its center had originally been founded to serve as a bridgehead for the margrave to quash local uprisings and fend off invasions.

You see, Marsheim had originally been located a little ways east, and there was an amusing anecdote about the current central fortress: Marsheim Castle and the hill it laid upon had appeared in one night.

Looking at the land from afar, it was clear that the surrounding area was a massive plain—the kind that, ordinarily, wouldn't have a giant hill on it. Presumably the ease of navigating the open land was what made it such an alluring killing field.

Thus an idea was born: how great a strategic advantage would one gain if

they could plant a castle in the middle of it?

The margraves of bygone years had clearly asked themselves this question often, as the books were filled with records of their many attempts. Naturally, regional rivals had not taken kindly to the notion; not only had they interfered, but they'd taken it upon themselves to try building their own forts on the field. Every attempt eventually spiraled into a bog of unending skirmishes as local actors built and tore down one another's strongholds.

For the longest time, the peoples of Ende Erde sustained the uniquely human cycle of burning untold manpower and resources to produce a pile of worthless rubble. That is, until one margrave was struck with genius: if the long building process was what left the would-be castles vulnerable, then why not build the thing beforehand?

The margrave poured everything he had into this all-or-nothing gambit. He gathered a mountain of dirt and gravel, amassed as much raw material as he possibly could, and swallowed his pride to beg the lords of other imperial states to lend him a team of oikodomurges numbering in the *double digits*.

With everything in place, the crew had marched to a key point on the plains and thrown together a castle on a hill for all to see.

When I'd first heard the story, I'd immediately suspected that it had been the work of another fellow reincarnator. Of course, I didn't actually believe that the castle had been propped up in one night: that absolutely had to be the result of hyperbole building up over the years. While it was more likely that they'd started with just the hill and a simple encampment, that was still a huge strategic benefit in and of itself, and would surely have improved the Empire's position significantly. Waking up to a mound of alien soil appearing out of nowhere would probably have been enough to make insurgent leaders pop a blood vessel in anger.

Whatever the truth of its origins were, the newly built hilltop castle had quickly become the lynchpin of western defense. More and more facilities had piled up around it, until it was eventually such a grand city that the margrave acknowledged its influence by dubbing it the new state capital and re-chrisenting it Marsheim.

Although we hadn't bothered to stop by, the old city of Marsheim was still around, albeit rebranded as Altheim. It remained a large urban center with around eight thousand citizens, but none of its former glory remained. Nowadays, it was merely a pit stop for the denizens of Ende Erde on the journey toward the center of Rhine.

All this thinking about the city and its rich history had me feeling giddy. The castle atop a hill, the series of towering walls rippling forth from it, and the mosaic patterns of discolored stones betraying the repairs of yesteryear all blended together to mold a fitting metropolitan character. Even the mishmash of heights and colors in the buildings around town spoke to the practicality that pervaded this remote urban center: who the hell wanted to waste their money making things look neat and uniform?

Another thing that caught my eye was the composition of the crowds around the main gates. Mensch could be found in all but the most extreme corners of the world, but I was pleasantly surprised to see a diverse mix of demihumans and demonfolk with traditional clothes and cargo to represent their cultures. Even among the mensch, many stood out sorely from the mostly homogenous traffic that I'd seen in Berylin.

Whoa, is that a lorelei?! I spied a person-drawn carriage filled with water, with the passenger submerged to their waist. My curiosity was piqued: I'd heard that the Mauser River was the lorelei's ancestral home, but traveling on land like that seemed terribly inconvenient. I couldn't help but wonder why they hadn't just entered the city via its waterways.

Speaking of rare sights, was that a vierman guard processing visitors at the gate? I'd almost missed them because their silhouette was similar to a mensch's from afar, but upon closer inspection they had the characteristic split at their shoulders, giving each side of their body two arms. I'd never seen one back in the capital; I'd heard they came from the same southern region as arachne, so maybe this one was foreign born. In any case, I was a bit jealous that they could keep a steady grip on their spear even while filing paperwork.

The colorful medley continued with zentaurs pulling carriages, callistians hauling cargo, and audhumbla mercenaries standing around in armor. Each seemed content to make the most out of their own endowments, and in turn,

those around them seemed content to accept those differences for the sake of better results. In that sense, it reminded me of one of my last job's few redeeming qualities.

Berylin's hustle and bustle had been great in its own way, but this unfettered display of vivacity had my heart pounding in the same way flipping through the setting pages of a new supplement did. The sweetness of painting over arachnid reaction with knowledge was a nectar only a change in scenery could provide—and it seemed like I wasn't the only one savoring the taste.

Margit had played the calm adult before we'd crested the hill, but now she'd fallen into an awed silence. I could feel her shifting around on my back, though; she was looking around just as excitedly as I was.

"This is amazing," I said.

"It... It truly is."

I tried talking to her just to check in, only to be met with an uncharacteristically dazed response. She'd told me she'd gone to the Old Town near Konigstuhl before, but Innenstadt was a totally different city. I couldn't blame her for being rattled.

Castor dutifully marched on in spite of our astonishment, and the flow of traffic became clearer as we got closer to the outer walls. Those dressed like merchants went to the southern gate; those traveling light with at most a bag or two—probably Marsheim citizens—went to the northern gate; those armed and in armor, like mercenaries and adventurers, went to the western gate.

Like Berylin, each gate probably served its own purpose. It just made sense: city guards had different protocols depending on who they were processing.

Steering us toward what looked to be our entrance, I found that the line leading into town was much longer than it'd seemed. People in lighter travel gear intermingled with fully geared fighters, but the whole area was enveloped in an ominous air. I noticed that there were far more guards here than at the other gates—all veterans, judging from their posture.

The people in line earned their daily bread by spilling blood, and their attitudes showed it. They were ready to fight at any time: if someone cut in line,

stepped on another's shoe, or even just looked at someone the wrong way, violence could break out.

This was why the security was so much tighter; no one wanted to see a small argument turn into an all-out brawl. Well, not that it mattered to me so long as I played the part of a respectable model citizen.

"Hey, bud."

Suddenly, a voice called out to me from below. I looked down to see a giant bald man. Carrying a hefty chest of armor on his shoulder as though it were a light bag of groceries, the man was, to put it bluntly, terrifying.

Put charitably, he was a walking omen of misfortune; more realistically, he looked the part of a disreputable musclehead. The man had two heads on me and his chest was thicker than a pair of children put back-to-back. His jagged facial features were—in my nicest words—the spitting image of criminality. As rude of me as it was to say, one look from him would send an average kid into a fit of tears or running for the hills.

"You got some nice horses. What're their names?"

Yet despite his appearance, the man opened up with a perfectly respectable question. His wicked face curled into a happy smile as he looked the Dioscuri up and down. Neither of my horses seemed to mind; they didn't sense any ill intent in his gaze.

"The one we're on is Castor, and the other is Polydeukes."

Though the guy looked exactly like the kind of two-bit villain who would get beaten up by a main character, I couldn't think of him as a bad person either. His body language was mild-mannered, and his admittedly crude speech didn't stray into the realm of vulgarity. Honestly, he just reminded me of the friendly old men at the racetracks back on Earth.

"Never heard of them. Those foreign names? I like them though—they got a manly ring to 'em."

"They're brothers, so I named them after twin heroes of a faraway land. I believe the language is similar to that of those spoken near the Southern Sea."

“Ooh, heroes, huh? I like that. Makes ’em sound all gutsy. A stallion’s gotta have guts.”

The more the man nodded to himself, the more the image of a horse-racing fan solidified in my mind. Up until now, the people who’d called out to me about the Dioscuri had only done so with unsolicited offers to buy them in mind—at laughably low prices, at that—so this was a refreshing change of pace.

“They got a bit of heft on ’em, but it’s a good heft. I bet they run real good, huh?”

“Yes, they do. Whether they’re carrying cargo or pulling a carriage, you won’t find any better horses in the whole Empire.”

“Heh, I bet. Nice necks, too. Nice and manly.” While a horse’s speed was most noticeably determined by their build, experienced riders also tended to pay attention to their necks. “You got some good horses. You could be a merc or an adventurer and they’d do you good. Take care of ’em, you hear?”

“But of course. I treat them as I would any good friend.”

“Yeah?” The man grew even more pleased—as evidenced by his increasingly scary expression—and laughed from the bottom of his heart. “I like you, bud. You’re a good kid.”

Still cackling, he reached out to grab my shoulder with his thick arm. Sensing something unpleasant was to come, Margit jumped off onto Castor’s butt; and as soon as his hand made contact, he began shaking me back and forth.

Whoa, wait, what?! Why’s he so strong?! Is he trying to shake my head off?!

“You’re still a kid, but hey, look at that! What color are you, bud? I’ve never seen you around, so you musta just come to town, huh?”

“Uh...” I rubbed at my aching neck. “Color?”

In an instant, his hearty smile turned into blank confusion.

“There’s only one thing an adventurer means when he asks about color, yeah?”

Oh, that’s right. Now that he mentioned it, the Adventurer’s Association tiered its members by color. The bottom level was soot-black, and from there it

went up to ruby-red, amber-orange, topaz-yellow, copper-green, sapphire-blue, and lapis-indigo—the ranks went up with the frequency of light that made the color. If I recalled, the very top was sandalwood-violet, but that color was an honorary tier reserved for the Emperor. This meant that the adventurer bodyguards-turned-crooks I'd cleaned up before had been chumps just one level removed from total know-nothings.

The system was admittedly a bit...familiar. Memories of Alpha Complex washed over me in a wave of ruby-red laser fire and the stink of ozone, but it was probably just a coincidence or an in-joke left by someone who shared my past.

That game's system was fun to fool around in, but I couldn't say I'd appreciated how fleeting life had been. Say the wrong thing? Dead. Take the game seriously? Dead. Carefully follow the intended path and prepare all the necessary items? Dead. I wasn't exactly deranged enough to enjoy being met with doom at every turn.

Anyway, the fact that the man had brought up the tiering system in the first place pointed to him being a fellow adventurer; considering how plainly strong he was, he had to be at least past the beginner levels. If the world was so rife with powerhouses that people like him were considered novices, then adventuring wouldn't have been seen as a fool's career to begin with.

"I'm sorry," I said. "We're actually planning to sign up once we get into the city."

"That's right." Shrewd as ever, Margit reclaimed her position on my back only after the localized earthquake was over. "At present, we don't have any rank or title to our names."

"Huh." Thoroughly surprised, the man's small eyes went wide and he scanned us up and down. "So you're telling me you've never gotten into a fight as an adventurer?"

"I guess so," I answered. "But it isn't as if I've never been in combat at all."

I wasn't technically lying. Sure, I'd gone through hell and back, but I was a total newbie *as an adventurer*. I could announce that I was a brand new Level 1 Fighter without a hint of shame, and any gatekeeper would let me in with a

raised knee and a thumbs-up.

“No experience, eh?” His voice carried the hint of impression as he mumbled to himself with his chin in his hand. After a moment of thought, he looked up and said, “If you’re gonna be adventurers, go down past the main road and the Association’ll be across from the Adrian Imperial Plaza.”

It was kind of him to give us directions; it saved me the effort of paying the city guards to tell us the way. Wandering around an unfamiliar city was far more dangerous than it had been in my past life, so knowing the path to our destination made a world of difference. Looking lost was an easy way to get marked by pickpockets, and I didn’t want to get wrapped up in a bloody fight before we’d even signed our paperwork.

“Thank you for the information. It would’ve been hard for rural kids like us to find our way around.”

“Gotta say, you look too done up to be from the country. Well, at least on the outside, I guess.”

The man’s contemplative expression vanished in an instant and he resumed his scary but jovial laughter. Maybe it was just because he was so close, but the thunderous guffaw physically shook me to my core. On top of his overwhelming presence, he stood at full alert, his armor chest was well-worn, and he carried some kind of large polearm wrapped up in cloth; the man gave off the energy of a frontline commander in spades.

Truth be told, he seemed strong. I wasn’t astute enough to judge exactly how strong without seeing him battle-ready, but my instincts told me that he would at least make a joke out of the daemonic ogre I’d faced after saving Lottie in the lakeside manor.

More and more, it seemed like the lawless lands of Marsheim really did breed stronger fighters. Those with apparent talent congregated in prestigious cities, but the harsh conditions of the frontier were enough to polish the diamonds left behind in the rough.

“Once you finish signing up,” the man said, “come on over to the Snoozing Kitten. It’s on Hovel Street with all the other inns.”

“The Snoozing Kitten? That’s an awfully cute name for an inn.”

“Sure is. But a tavern’s worth ain’t in its name—it’s in its food, its booze, and how good its rooms are. Ah, and Hovel Street’s one street north from the Association, all the way west. The walls’ll make you turn a bit, but you’ll figure it out.”

Something told me that he wasn’t *just* recommending his favorite inn to us. Good-natured though he seemed, some ulterior motive hid out of sight. I didn’t want to sound haughty, but he was a good example that the simple were not necessarily the stupid.

“If you head there around sundown, you should catch a guy named Fidelio there. Just ask around at the bar and you’ll find him.”

“...Fidelio?”

“You heard me.” He smirked. “Plenty of guys with that name, right?”

Plenty of guys did indeed have that name. It was a word from the Orisons that meant “truth,” and had enjoyed popularity since ancient times with parents who wished for their sons to grow into honest men. I had even known one in Konigstuhl.

But we’d just heard the legend of a hero with the same name. It was all a little too timely.

“And what business might we have with this Mister Fidelio?”

“I’m just saying that he’s a guy you’ll wanna talk to at least once if you’re trying to get anywhere in this line of work.”

Hm... From what I could glean of the man’s character in our conversation, this musclehead didn’t seem like the type to throw newbies into a criminal scam, but I had a strange tingling in my spine.

Was this excitement at a twist of fate? Or were my alarm bells going off?

But I just couldn’t sense any bad intentions from the man. I’d learned my lessons about trusting pretty faces and first impressions in Berylin, but that was exactly why I felt confident in my ability to pick out the evil that hid behind perfectly set smiles.

This wasn't a skill given to me by the future Buddha's blessing—it was one I'd built up over my time as a player. It was an intuition that I'd honed outside of the world's system, and it was telling me that this evil-looking man was kind at heart.

"Excuse me for being forward," I said, "but why did you think to refer us to this inn?"

"Heh, come on, bud. Ain't it obvious? Thing'll be more fun that way."

As the man burst into wholehearted laughter, all I could think was that we'd rolled our way into a peculiar encounter. But just then, an angry voice yelled at us from behind. The line had advanced forward without us, and those behind us were getting impatient.

"Hansel! Quit cajoling the kids and move your fat ass!"

"My bad, Necker! Couldn't see you down there!"

"Shut your trap—it's you, not me! I forget: was it your mom or your dad who's the giant?"

Class was an alien concept to the two quipping men, but it wasn't hostile; they were clearly friends. Where those from other cities would draw their swords at such slander—insulting someone's parents in the Trialist Empire was a quick way to find a fight—it seemed like this was part of daily life out here.

On Earth we'd said that when in Rome, do as the Romans do; here, we said that to know the land, one must drink from its wells. It sounded like I'd need to brush up on my banter if I wanted to stick around.

I may have already managed to run into foreshadowing for a newbie adventurer's trial by fire, but I wasn't too torn up about it. I wondered why. Maybe it was just that he was good with his words, or maybe there really was something else in store.

Plus, y'know, I felt bad second-guessing a guy with a name as cute as *Hansel*, regardless of how badly it fit him.

As we moved ahead to catch up to the line, I turned and asked one last thing. "By the way, would you happen to know of any good stables around here?"

[Tips] The Adventurer's Association was founded in the Age of Gods as a joint venture between many competing deities. In the modern day, however, only a vague symbolic solidarity remains.

Pure bedlam—such were the only words I could muster in the face of this unfamiliar hustle and bustle.

People packed the streets, salesmen shouted at their stalls, and eye-catching articles of every sort lined the shops; but that went for Berylin too.

What the capital lacked was the utter *frenzy* in the air.

It felt like everyone here was desperate, almost. The pace of traffic was rapid, as if those walking by couldn't spare a second to think about bumping shoulders with oncoming pedestrians; the collisions, in turn, gave rise to all sorts of noisy arguments. Many people were so poorly kept that they would've gotten a scolding from the guards had they been in Berylin.

On the other hand, the merchants pushed their products with manic zeal and the townspeople all seemed to be driven by some unyielding purpose. The overwhelming drive that pervaded the streets had our rustic minds spinning. Though I'd been born too late to experience them in my past life, I imagined this had been the same hubbub as the mining towns of the industrial revolution.

"Hold on tight, Margit."

"As if I would even think of letting go. I'm afraid someone might step on me if I did."

The hands around my neck were squeezing more than usual. I couldn't imagine how Margit would fare when she was shorter than a floresiensis. Floresiensis, goblins, and children *were* deftly swimming through the sea of people, but anyone unaccustomed to the city was sure to get trampled. No wonder Mr. Hansel had told us to stick together as we'd bid him goodbye.

"Um," I said, "I guess we should start by heading to the stable."

“That sounds good. It doesn’t seem as if we can get around with these two in tow.”

Being hit with the ordeal of getting around after a smooth entry process was giving me whiplash, but we carried ourselves toward the stable Mr. Hansel had recommended. Every city was home to places to check in horses, but it was hard to gauge how well-kept an establishment was without firsthand experience. Listening to a local’s advice was the best way to find a good one.

Still, I couldn’t get over how night and day the experience was inside and outside the walls. When we’d gotten to the gate, I’d shown the guards a write of identity I’d gotten in Konigstuhl, as well as a Berylinian citizenship slab—which, come to think of it, was valuable in its own right—I’d gotten from Lady Agrippina. That had been it: they’d let us in without any further questions.

I supposed I could understand the lenient security after looking at the chaos within the city. That they let in anyone with an ID and no apparent criminal history must have been what allowed the city to grow. Besides, it saved me the hassle of getting papers-please’d for hours on end, so I was happy to benefit. It was ever best to strike while the iron was hot, and nothing could cool fiery excitement harder than wasting the first day of a trip doing paperwork and collapsing in bed before doing anything of note.

That said, the laxity also meant I needed to stay on my toes: there were probably a good deal of people happy to break the rules in ways that wouldn’t draw the guards’ attention.

Getting back to stables, there were two kinds: those inside and outside the city walls. Obviously, the ones inside boasted higher quality. They needed a license just like any other business within city limits, but the regulations around horses were especially strict, because they were considered military assets. After all, a battle could easily be won or lost based on the number of horses involved.

The stables operating on the interior were thus superior by default. But because the markets of the Empire weren’t so ludicrously competitive that service providers had to shave every penny off their prices to see business, that also meant the fees involved were a sight to behold.

“Welcome, welcome—oh! It isn’t every day we get customers as young as you.”

The place we’d been sent to was the Seal Brown Stables, a business operated by a zentaur couple. Thankfully, they broke the stereotype of zentaur-equals-barbarian that Dietrich had implanted in my brain.

“Oh my, what impressive horses!”

“Wow, these are Ostenbruts. I never thought we’d get real war horses all the way out here.”

The husband and wife proprietors were, well, small. Not on absolute scales, mind you: they were still at least two meters tall and easily eclipsed me. But compared to the enormous Dietrich, they looked seriously tiny.

Maybe they traced their heritage to ponies. I knew that some horse breeds were just naturally smaller even without human interference, so it followed that the same was true of zentaurs—but it was still a tad surprising to see zentaurs running a business in the city as opposed to doing physical labor.

“This is a wonderful stable,” I said.

“You think so? Thank you kindly. But sweet-talking us won’t get you any discounts.”

All the horses being kept were clean and cared-for; I couldn’t spot a single one that looked like it was being neglected. Not only was the facility clean, but each individual stall was free of manure and had fresh feed and bedding, eliminating any source of bad odor.

“We like to run a business where we can hold our heads high. But that means we have to ask: do you have proof of ownership with you?”

“Oh, of course. I have some papers.”

I handed over the documents I’d received from Lady Agrippina and the husband looked over them—as was expected, he was literate—until he was satisfied. He then neatly folded the pieces of parchment back up and returned them.

“Sorry to be so distrustful. There’ve been lots of incidents lately, and we ran

into serious trouble when it turned out one of the horses we were caring for was stolen. We got lumped in with the thief and it was a whole mess, so we're trying to be extra careful."

"Ah," I said, "that must have been an ordeal. Don't worry, I understand where you're coming from."

This was an era where horses were worth small fortunes: two as impressive as Castor and Polydeukes were effectively the same as high-end sports cars. If a pair of condos on legs came marching along, that was a perfectly sound reason to be extra cautious.

"Still, you two really are young. I'd like to say you've got a good eye for your age to pick out our business...but we aren't exactly in the easiest spot to find, and I doubt you just wandered here on dumb luck. Did someone send you our way?"

The proprietor asked the question after he brought out the final contract written out on a wooden tablet. Not having any reason to hide the truth, I answered that Mr. Hansel had sent us.

"Ah, that bald oaf? Should be fine, then. He's a regular of ours—see, that one's his."

He pointed at a remarkable mare. She had a chestnut coat and her gentle eyes were closed tight as she leaned on the door to her stall for a leisurely nap.

"He left her behind today because of something about a carriage, I think, but she's a good horse. And Hansel spoils her like his own child."

"So that's why he recommended this place," I said.

"I'm pretty sure he just hates seeing horses get mistreated. He's a weirdo who'll kill people but not touch their steeds, so if yours caught his eye, he probably wanted to make sure they got the care they deserve."

Huh. I could kind of relate. Chopping off bandit heads was easy, but to this day, I felt bad about hurting the horses they rode. They felt more like innocent bystanders swept up in human schemes than real co-conspirators.

"But that still doesn't mean you're getting any discounts," the man

concluded.

“That’s too bad.” It really, really was too bad. The total list of costs that he’d brought out had nearly made my eyes jump out of their sockets.

Their services included luxuries like regularly taking the horses to graze outside if we didn’t plan to take them out ourselves, and the price reflected that by reaching numbers akin to Lady Agrippina’s inns. The cheapest stables wouldn’t even charge half this amount.

“Goodness,” Margit said. “What a stately total... At this rate, they’ll be getting better lodging than we will.”

“Yeah... But it’s actually on the cheaper side for the quality. At the worst places, it’s hard to tell if you’re looking at a horse or a sick mutt.”

Clean facilities and full meals necessitated prices like these. An average horse drank more than twenty liters of water a day and ate over ten kilograms of food. It wasn’t like they could just be let loose to graze for themselves, so it genuinely did seem like the contract was cheaper than it could get away with being.

“Even so, thirty librae a month is quite the sum,” Margit said. “That’s nearly four drachmae a year.”

“It’ll be a little cheaper if you sign for a renewing contract,” the owner said. “Twenty-five librae a month. I figured you’d be able to afford it since Hansel sent you our way...but if not, there isn’t much we can do. We don’t accept tabs, and we don’t accept horses as collateral either.”

Ah, it appeared that he’d seen through our finances to some degree—though that wasn’t exactly hard when we had two war horses out in plain sight. It also didn’t help that he was right.

“Fair enough,” I said. “We’ll take the renewing deal. I’ll pay for half a year up front.”

“Thank you kindly. If you could just sign here...”

As much as it pained me to put down the money, this was a necessary expense. Plus, them carefully confirming my paperwork helped solidify my

impression that this was a business I could trust.

With horses being worth small fortunes, managing to steal even one represented a huge payday—especially for fancy breeds like mine. Shadier stables ran scams where they'd sell off good horses and replace them with worthless jades that they pushed onto the original owners.

The Seal Brown Stables were home to several high-grade horses and were still in business despite coming out the gate with aggressive prices; the only explanation was that they were well trusted in the community. It wasn't an unreasonable amount to pay for a place to keep our adventuring companions safe.

"Let me see... So six months will be one drachma and fifty—"

"Erich? Just a moment, please."

The proprietor had written in the period and total price, and I signed after confirming that the math was right. But just as I reached for my wallet—we kept our big coins in the space-bending box for safekeeping—Margit pulled out the joint purse around my neck.

"These two are *our* assets, aren't they? Don't you think we should pay for them together?"

"Huh? But I'm technically their owner."

"Isn't is a tad late to be saying that now? Your fate and mine are one and the same, and these two are both of our companions. I'd say it's only natural that each of us pitch in to house them."

If Margit was going to go this far, then I didn't have any real reason to refuse; we ended up paying with our joint funds. I couldn't have been more grateful. Truly, nothing was as hard to come by as a thoughtful partner.

"Aw, you two are making me jealous. You've got a good woman, Mister."

"Did you say something, dear?"

"No, darling. Nothing."

Quickly moving on from how I'd blushed at the husband's teasing, I was glad we'd found a dependable place for the Dioscuri. In an age where money didn't

guarantee service, services that offered fair value for their prices were precious. The zentaur couple seemed nice, and I was happy to keep patronizing their business in the future.

As a cherry on top, the brothers managed to catch the proprietor's eye, and he offered to introduce them to good mares if I was so willing—which, of course, I was. Commoners tended to breed their horses with other people's and then share the foal. Owning both a stallion and mare was a major investment, and it wasn't healthy to breed multiple generations within a single house. Rich nobles with large pastures could get away with it, but everyone else got around inbreeding by lending horses to one another.

Back home, Holter had sired children for the magistrate's mare with the promise that our family would receive a new horse once Holter was too old to work. The Dioscuri weren't going to be fit for battle forever either, so I was grateful to receive the offer. I'd been hoping to keep their bloodline going in the back of my mind, and this seemed like a great opportunity to let my trusty steeds find brides.

The husband and wife saw us off with smiles and a promise to let us know if they found someone who might be interested. Done with that, Margit and I once again returned to the mayhem of Main Street.

Anywhere and everywhere I looked, there were *people*. What was this, a New Year's sale?!

Navigating the crowds in the heat of early summer had me working up a sweat. It was hot enough that the arachne on my back was starting to feel refreshingly cool in comparison.

"Say, Erich?"

"What's up?"

"Do you think I'm allowed to walk on the rooftops?"

Bewildered by the non sequitur, I followed Margit's pointer finger to see sirens hopping from roof to roof, flapping their wings to soften their landings. And it wasn't just them: smaller peoples like stuarts and jenkins boldly scurried along routes that would get them hunted down by the city guards in the capital.

Uh... Is *that allowed?*

I stared dumbfounded for a moment, but then noticed that the guards at a nearby corner didn't seem to care. Apparently, the rooftops were fair game in Marsheim so long as you didn't scatter shingles all over the place. I wasn't sure if it was expressly *allowed*, but the town was at least hectic enough not to care about enforcing a ban.

"I'd prefer if you stayed with me," I said.

"Is that so? Well, then," Margit giggled, "I suppose I'll have to stay by your side."

I was a grown-up inside, so I wasn't going to say I'd be lonely or anything. Frankly, I just had no confidence in our ability to reconvene if we got separated. Although I'd enchanted her earring to receive my Voice Transfers, that wouldn't be an instant solution when neither of us knew the landmarks around town. Considering the worst case, I just didn't want to risk getting lost.

"Sorry to make you suffer the crowds."

"Hee hee, I don't mind. How could I ever say no to you?"

As she snickered in my ear, I clasped her hand to express my thanks and set off. We walked past three layers of city walls—each could be closed in times of emergency to delay an attacker's advance—until the main road ended and we found ourselves at the Adrian Imperial Plaza.

The plaza was a modest little clearing with a small fountain and a few unmaintained flower beds. It wasn't exactly a tourist attraction, and was honestly a few steps shy of a nice place to rest. Truthfully, I could've believed that it was just a roundabout to connect other streets to the main one.

Even so, plenty of people were passing by and it was enough to tickle my heartstrings. Dull light shimmered off armor; obvious weapons were stuffed into bags to comply with city law; foreign tongues entered my ear from every direction. As the clearing directly in front of the Adventurer's Association, Adrian Imperial Plaza was a hotbed of adventurers waiting for their party mates.

Some were green and others were more grizzled, but they were all geared up

without exception. These were my coworkers; these were my rivals.

Nice. Now I'm getting excited. No matter how old I got, quintessential scenes like this were sure to perk me up. I couldn't help but want to jump in right this very second.

While I could have spent my whole day just soaking it all in, the excitement won out and I marched over to the Association's doors. The building was fairly large. Its exterior design was simple, but the stone bricks gave it a certain gravitas. Though it was only two stories tall, it was built wide enough to retain its sense of gravitas.

Subdued walnut wood was used for the windows and pillars, and it paired well with the somber gray stone. Amazingly, the windows were paned with luxurious glass sheets that were totally clear. I couldn't even imagine how many gold pieces had evaporated trying to put together this many pieces of glass without shivering.

But what drew my eye most of all was the giant sign hanging out front. The words "Adventurer's Association" were written in graceful lettering on a slab of wood that, from what I could see, hadn't been pieced together; it must've been a single giant slice of an ancient tree. Signs were the face of an organization, and it was evident the Association had shelled out.

The road here had been *long*. At one point, I'd thought that it wasn't possible at all. But here I was, ready to fulfill my promise—ready to hold my partner to hers so that we could do as we willed.

"Are you ready?" Margit whispered in my ear.

I nodded without a word. Not wanting to clog up the entrance like a fool, I picked myself up and headed in.

Opening a door as heavy as its size suggested, I entered a space much more subdued than what one might expect from a den of adventure. One contiguous plank formed a long countertop at the back of the expansive hall, home to eight counters in total. This time of day evidently didn't see much business, as only three of the eight were manned; the others just had a hanging plaque that read "closed".

Small tables of varying heights—probably the product of a diverse clientele—were lined up in front of the counters. It seemed like we were expected to write out our paperwork there and then take it to the clerks once we were done.

In which case, the handful of people sitting around on foldable chairs by the writing station were probably scribes looking for illiterate customers. They got up as soon as they took a look at us, so I was certain about my guess.

The right side of the hall had a few coffee tables and couches, but the handful of adventurers gathered there were just killing time. Nobody was drinking to a job well done.

I figured that was only natural. Loud drunkards would be a bother for the white collar Association employees trying to work, and letting a bunch of rough and rowdy adventurers commingle with alcohol was just asking for trouble.

In which case, the seats and tables had probably only been set up so parties could discuss jobs or wait their turn at the counter. The idea of an adventuring guild-house was inextricably linked in my mind to that of a pub, and I couldn't deny that I was a bit let down.

On the left was an array of large partitions.

Actually, upon closer inspection, they weren't partitions at all: each big enough to count as its own wall, the screens were grouped together based on the color of their edges. Most of them had black borders, with the next most numerous group being red, then orange. Much like the College's job bulletin, these were quest boards filled with tasks that needed doing.

Apparently, the walls hadn't had enough space to fit all the requests, and the big boards were the Association's solution. Curiously enough, the colors seemed only to go up to yellow; maybe one had to go up to the counter to ask about higher ranking jobs.

As expected, the loiterers had been scribes, and I declined their services by explaining that I could read and write. I had the chops to pen letters on behalf of a count, and I would be damned if I let someone sell me writing services.

Now, if the tropes continued, then this would be the part where we'd be greeted by a pretty young girl manning the front desk...

“Hm? Do you need something?”

...But all three of the women at the desk were well along in their years, with stout and hearty builds.

Naturally so. No sane person would sentence a pretty young girl to the fate of dealing with savage adventurers. Being able to snap back at any audacious clients was basically part of the job description, anyhow.

“If you have a request, tell me what kind it is and I’ll get you the right form—no, we don’t take letters. Are you working for a merchant somewhere?”

“No, we’re here to become adventurers.”

“Heuh?”

The clerk froze in the middle of reaching for some kind of form and let out a funny sound. I guess she’d really confused us for some merchant’s messengers. We’d come straight here without changing out of our travel wear, though, and I didn’t think we looked all that proper.

“You and the little lady on your back?”

“Well, yes.”

“I could’ve bet my heart that you were here to hire bodyguards or something. Wait, if you shooed off the scribes, then you must be able to write. Why would you want to work a run-down job like this? I’m sure you have plenty of other ways to put bread on the table.”

“You want me to put in a good word somewhere? I think there’s a tavern on the charcoal street that’s looking for servers.”

“Oh, you know they wouldn’t take a boy there. Hey, you. Are you any good with your hands? I can help you get a job if you’re interested in apprenticing under a woodworker.”

As soon as we got to the issue at hand, the other two receptionists snapped out of their bored stupor to join in. They barraged us with talk about how we should find better jobs that weren’t so dangerous and provided cute uniforms and what have you; no matter the country or world, middle-aged ladies were ever prone to worrying about the young.

Margit and I politely declined all their offers—boy, we sure were getting a lot of those today—and received an application form. The paper was made of cheap fibers as opposed to parchment, making it rough and discolored.

The contents of the form weren't anything to note. Name, birthplace, and next of kin were standard; other than that, there was a small section for skills and possessions that might be relevant to work.

"Um," I said. "Is that it? Don't you need a writ of identity or, well...anything else?"

"Huh? No, no—not while you've still got your soot. It's not like you'll be getting big jobs anyway. The Association would fall apart if we had to vet every black and red member, and what would people do if they couldn't even become an *adventurer?*"

"But you'll have a lot more to write if you climb the ranks. Amber adventurers can get jobs straight from us, so you'll need to have your family registry and writ of identity then."

"Yup, and you'll have an easier time getting promoted since you've got a good background. Oh, but pipe up if you ever want help with your work. Lots of people will group together if they hear others are looking to join hands."

The receptionist corps gave me three answers for one question, and nothing could reassure me more. I didn't have to lift a finger, and an endless font of relevant knowledge came rushing my way.

The official badge we got for signing up would only be effective within Marsheim so long as we were at the black or red ranks, and it wouldn't be accepted as proof of identity even inside the city. These plaques were handed out to anyone who took the time to write down a few words, and their only use was for the Association to sort its bottommost recruits.

Yet taken the other way around, that meant that the higher tiers *did* serve as identification, just like my wooden Berylinian citizenship card. With one of those, we could travel to any city with an Association branch and be treated just the same way we would be here.

Furthermore, adventurers of every sort received discounts on tolls into and

out of cities, but those at amber-orange and above were entirely exempt. This exemption didn't extend to personal travel, but that was still a major privilege.

The tiering structure of the Association was better viewed as a measure of dependability than of raw competence. We'd need to select our jobs carefully: it wasn't just about completing a bunch of quests, but also about how reliably we completed them and how good of an impression we left on our clients.

None of this really mattered in the early stages. Like I'd mentioned, there were too many small fry for the Association to keep close eyes on us all. They'd only pay us any mind if we proved ourselves first; but once we did, the scrutiny would scale with our notoriety.

Having a sponsor or a good reputation made it easier to climb ranks—of course it did. If the Association handed out high ranks to everyone with a talent for violence, people would immediately use their authority to commit crimes and thus damage the organization's optics. If we wanted to make it to the top, we'd need to build trust, either through social standing or personal character.

"Let's do our best to get promoted, shall we?"

"Yeah, let's."

"After all, what would be the point of our journey if we stay petty handymen forever?"

"Oh, yeah? I didn't think you were the type to care about that sort of thing."

I'd been staring at the bland metal chip in my hand, engraved with an unembellished number, and feeling its heft as though it were my own soul. But Margit's comment struck me as a bit out of character, and I looked up at her curiously.

For her part, she'd been listlessly toying with the worthless trinket, but then looked up to meet my gaze. Upon locking eyes with me, she smiled a predacious smile, pulling the corners of her lips far back to unveil two ferocious fangs.

"My, didn't you know? I've *always* been on the hunt for greater game."

I'd seen this menacing smile hundreds of times before...but even now, as my

first adult summer was beginning, it sent a chill down my spine.

[Tips] Adventuring has spawned many legends and sagas that capture the hearts of children everywhere, but can hardly be called a path of honest living.

Our adventurer signup process began and ended with paper—not a single cryptic orb or blood-drawing plaque with numerical stat values in sight. Stories of days past nearly unanimously exposed their heroes' talents in places like this, but obviously, such technology would twist the basic structure of the world just by virtue of being.

Think about it: automagical appraisal removed the need for any and every kind of testing. Even assuming there were only a handful in existence kept as national treasures by the world's superpowers, they would certainly be used for imperial service exams. The incompetent would vanish from the upper class's ranks in an instant.

Or, rather, I suppose the things would be smashed to bits as soon as one got in the way of a powerful oligarch trying to pass down the family title. Many were the ambitious souls trying to put their children into seats of power, and they would not let a nuisance of that magnitude sit in one piece for long.

It appeared that the metrics that made up people were filed away under labels that only the gods could access. I'd assumed as much, since even my blessing only let me peek into my own stats. At one point, I'd looked into whether a sufficiently leveled Keen Eye would be enough to see through someone else's power level, but quickly realized that accurately knowing my own was already a privilege greater than I could hope for.

But thanks to this way of the world, my self-introduction as a Lv 1 Fighter—just a figure of speech, of course—raised no red flags. Margit had also turned in her forms saying she was a scout, but she didn't seem quite as inexperienced as me on paper thanks to her experience as a canton huntsman.

With our paperwork settled, we could get right to questing...but didn't. You see, the considerate ladies running the front desk were kind enough to give us a lesson on all things adventuring first.

One major piece of news was that not everyone operated in fixed groups. In my mind, an adventuring party was composed of three to five unchanging members; in reality, it was a much more flexible affair.

After all, spell-casting mages and miracle-working priests weren't exactly easy to find.

While capable individuals were sometimes kept on a fixed roster, most people signed up for jobs as needed and simply got to know a few regular teammates as time went on. The usual process involved core units of two or three hiring a few helping hands depending on what the job of the day entailed, just the same as day laborers. Temporary partnerships could become more permanent if those involved really hit it off, but the industry practice was to pass talent around to different groups as they were needed.

That was fair enough. It was plain to see that one would need some kind of divine intervention to put together a full party right off the bat. If society had figured out a rational way to work things out, we might as well follow suit.

Still, I had to admit that I was a bit disappointed. My expectations were being subverted at every turn.

“So, what do you say? We’d be happy to let others know if you’re looking for a helping hand.”

“Or on the other hand, we can point you toward parties that are recruiting instead.”

I glanced down at Margit, and she agreed with my wordless message by shaking her head. The two of us were lucky enough to be a fighter—slash mage—and scout; our composition was solid enough to get by on our own. We didn’t need help badly enough to justify the trial-and-error of headhunting, and it didn’t seem like a great idea to introduce more variability when we were still getting our feet wet.

The clerks here seemed happy to help us search for teammates, so it seemed safe to come back and ask for assistance only if we ended up needing it. Besides, the bulletin boards in this building also had a section for advertisements, meaning we could look through those in case we wanted to browse.

We probably wouldn’t be getting jobs outside the city for the foreseeable future anyway. I wanted to see how far the two of us could go on our own.

“Oh, to be young.”

“Aw, I remember being just like them when I was their age.”

“*Please.* At their age, you were three times fatter than her.”

“Pff—ha ha!”

The ladies teased us as middle-aged ladies were wont to do. Though we weren’t newlyweds, signing up as a pair was close enough that I decided to just resign myself to the inevitable jokes.

“Oh, wait. If you two are here to become adventurers, does that mean you’re staying in an inn?”

“You really shouldn’t go to normal lodges if you have weapons on you.”

“There are places set aside for people in bloody lines of work.”

Moving on, they started telling us about the establishments adventurers often used. The Association came down hard on anyone who caused a scene in the official building or in the plaza outside—in extreme cases, people could be demoted—and so most chose to gather in their own taverns of choice instead.

Being the rootless blades of grass that we were, adventurers didn’t tend to settle down in one spot; if they did, it was almost always a pub where housing, food, and drinks were available for purchase. Marsheim was home to several such businesses explicitly geared toward adventurers.

On the flip side, those who wandered to the civilian-centric establishments were terribly unwelcome. I couldn’t blame them: the owners were civilians themselves, and nothing could be more terrifying than letting an armed, trained combatant right into one’s own house.

The ladies listed several different options where we wouldn’t get glared out of the inn, saying that which one we chose would depend on our finances. Youth came with the privilege of being taught by one’s elders—no comment on mental age—and I couldn’t be happier to take advantage of it.

Miss Coralie, the first clerk we’d talked to, recommended the Snowy Silverwolf inn as the best place to start. Although the prices were fairly high, the owner was a former adventurer with a reputation for their soft spot for newbies to the point of offering discounts on a lot of the services provided.

On the other hand, Miss Thais—the one who’d suggested the restaurant job

—said that the Buck's Antlers would be a better spot if we wanted to start saving for the future. This was an ultra-cheap motel with several large commons full of bedding, but they had separate wings for men and women and boasted good security for the price. They even opened up a steam bath once a week for no extra charge, making them very popular with beginners.

Lastly, the clerk with woodworking connections, Miss Eve, gave us the name of a location that was less a suggestion and more a goal. The Golden Mane was a tavern renowned for its epicurean quality. One night in their cheapest room without any extra bells or whistles cost fifty assarii—which, mind you, was a tiny room with two three-layer bunk beds. That alone sounded like a scam, but they changed out their sheets every two days and cleaned the rooms every three days; in terms of hygiene, they were almost *weirdly* attentive. Add to that the fact that Wine God priests stopped by to enjoy the food and drink served in its pub, and it was clear why some adventurers considered staying a night one of their life's major goals.

All this was wonderful intel; nothing could be as important as a dependable inn. Finding a place where we could let down our guard and rest easy was a must if we wanted to get by in this unfamiliar land.

Seeing as we weren't particularly strapped for cash, we would probably go for the Snowy Silverwolf. That it wasn't too far from the Association was a big plus.

I wanted to see the place for myself, though, so our next destination was settled. But just as we started for the door, the string of subverted expectations came to an end.

"Heya, greenhorns. Heard you two are new to adventuring?"

"Signing up together and all is nice to watch. Real cute."

A baptism by trope came walking right toward us in the form of two adventurers stopping us on our way out. One was a mensch, and the other was a cynocephalus—probably of the gnoll variety.

But cliched as they were, they were not the kind of two-bit punks that littered wishful storytelling. Their clothes, though plain, were of respectable make; their daggers—small arms were hardly enough for law enforcement to react out here in the borderlands—boasted similar quality. Yet in spite of their neatly tailored

appearances, they carried themselves with the assurance of veteran fighters.

Not too shabby. I bet they could hold their own against the watchmen back home.

A dull orange tag peeked out from their shirts; they were heads and shoulders above us. If my read on the social power dynamics of these tiers was right, then I'd need to start investing in bootlicking skills to sustain a conversation with them.

"What pleasure might I owe two veteran adventurers?" I asked.

Yet this was no failed utopia governed by broken overlords. I met my seniors with the gracious courtesy of a smile.

"Ah, nothing major. Seeing you rookies just brought back old memories, see?"

"Yep, we've all been there, y'know? And so we figured, hey, why not help the kids along and show them the ropes."

However, the two men showed no signs of caring and continued coming on strong. I could sense that Margit was on edge beside me, so I put a hand on her shoulder to convey that I would handle this.

Today was our first day, and causing a huge ruckus just wouldn't do. Even if an incident did unfold, I wanted to make sure it didn't wrap us up in it.

"Ebbo! Kevin! Quit picking on them!"

"You better not do anything to those two!"

But before I could say anything, the ladies at the counter stood up for us. The men's reactions betrayed that the mensch was Ebbo, and the gnoll was Kevin.

"C'mon!" Ebbo said in a hurt tone. "Who do you think we are?"

"Look, we're not gonna hurt them, okay?" Kevin then turned to me with a deviously toothy smile. "Hey, pal. We'll teach you a thing or two and even treat you to dinner. What do you say to just one meal?"

Well, I supposed I'd take the opportunity to learn about the...ways of adventuring. Whether I bit the bullet now or put it off, I'd have to get around to it eventually, anyway.

[Tips] Personal combat in Marsheim can be punished with no more than ten librae in fines or one month of hard labor. This is an extremely heavy sentence compared to other cities and speaks to the city's long history of violence.

Taken in reverse, however, this also means that anyone willing to swallow these terms is free to pick fights.

The two adventurers brought us a long ways out to a pub that was closer to the city walls than anything else.

Big outer walls tended to cut off sunlight, and the shady nearby areas were naturally prone to lower income peoples for pretty much every city. They weren't totally shunned, per se, but the denizens of these unpaved streets wore dirty rags and lived in buildings that were only a step removed from slum houses.

Dangling one sign labeled "The Inky Squid" out front was a pub that fit its surroundings all too well. To call it well-kept would be undue flattery, and the clientele out front pointed to this being a tavern for adventurers. That two men were napping in the dirt absolutely wasted was a nice touch to bring the outskirts atmosphere together.

Despite this air of villainy, our walk to this point had been surprisingly unnoteworthy. The adventurers leading the way had only asked about our place of origin, our experience in battle, and other normal questions. We hadn't suffered any outright bullying, nor had the men made any inappropriate remarks toward Margit.

But what I *had* noticed was a heavy, analytical gaze. They'd eyed us from head to toe, watching our slightest movements, as if they were trying to put a number to my value. What they were interested in was what we were *worth*.

They beckoned us through the door and I obliged, only to be met with the pungent odor of alcohol. Strong, sour fumes of cheap booze lingered in the air.

This was a bar fit to open its doors to the ends of all earth.

Cleaning was an unfamiliar custom here, evident from the sticking sensation

on the soles of my boots and the liquors lining the shelves without rhyme or rhythm. Tables and chairs were strewn throughout at random, as though no thought had ever been given to how the space ought to be used.

The patrons, for their part, were no paragons of dignity either: for most, I couldn't even guess at when they'd last bathed. Anyone used to the tidiness of the capital would have immediately backed out and pretended they had seen nothing.

Booze and puke and grime mingled together into a noxious haze. One thing was for sure: I would never choose to stay in an inn like this.

That said, this wasn't bad. No, it wasn't bad at all. Margit was grimacing—she may have been a working huntress, but that had made her one of the most well-to-do young ladies in Konigstuhl—but I didn't hate it.

Because this is exactly where an adventurer belongs.

"Boss!"

"We picked you up a fun kid!"

That, and because I'd never imagined I might see treasure laying around in a pile of waste like this.

"Hrm?"

Filtered through a layer of drink was a grunt somewhere between scratchy and husky in tone. The woman's voice was deep enough to push some buttons for those with the right ear for it, but it came slipping out of a mouth bookended by two menacing fangs.

Her red-brown hair was loose and unkempt, and the rust-colored eyes peeking out from below it were dimly lit with equal parts lethality and lethargy. She sat cradling a sword in the very back of the tavern, on a couch obviously reserved for her. Yet despite the sofa's impressive size, the towering ogre made it look like a tiny chair.



This made for my third encounter with an ogre warrior.

Yet my initial impression was that she wasn't as impressive as the first two I'd met. Miss Lauren, the first of their kind I'd ever met, had been several cuts above in both strength and looks. This ogre was pretty in her own way and was probably far from being *weak*, but I didn't get the same instinctive "Oh gods, she's *strong*" that I'd felt during that festival many years ago.

I could guarantee that it wasn't because of my own growth, either. Even if I were to meet her again as I was now, I was sure that the overpowering aura of strength would still whittle away at my will.

But here, I sensed no such genius.

On a shallower note, Miss Lauren had been fairly attentive to her appearances. I'd later learned that ogres partook in makeup as a way of honoring those strong enough to take their heads in battle—the logic being that it would be rude to give the victor a sorry trophy—and she'd set her hair with oil and worn perfume. The woman in front of me, on the other hand, seemed uninterested in such preparations.

"Ah...a mensch," she said. "What's he like?"

"Looks *real* to me, boss."

"Yep. Not a normal freshie, at least. We could throw a whole house of grunts at him and I think he'd do fine."

As expected, our two guides had enough insight to see my strength for what it was. Though, honestly, I'd confirmed as much when my Overwhelming Grin did nothing to dissuade their advances.

"Is that so. Fine, have him get ready."

The ogre scratched her head so violently that a few strands of metallic hair fell to the ground. She was, well...a bit of a waste. If she put in any effort at all, she would've been beautiful. It was a shame.

Margit must have read my mind, because she deftly worked her legs to pinch me in the back. I gave an apologetic little squirm and then shifted gears by asking the two men what the big idea was.

“Hm, how do I put this? Basically, when we find a promising rookie, we’re supposed to bring them back here.”

“Yep. Boss-lady’s orders.”

The half-assed explanation was paired with a gift haphazardly thrown my way. I caught it and found that it was a plain and worn wooden sword. Although it was a training weapon, it had a metal core running through its length that meant a solid hit could very well break someone’s bones.

“Them’s the breaks. Welcome to Clan Laurentius.”

“C’mon, new guy—the yard’s this way.”

Putting their hands around my back, the two adventurers pushed me along with wicked grins.

Yeah, figures.

The desk ladies at the Association had been kind enough to also fill us in on independent organizations put together by adventurers themselves. Perhaps because the practice originated with immigrants from the north, adventurers called these sorts of groups “clans”.

The major benefit to banding together in an association larger than a single party was that it made it easier to facilitate cooperation when it came to big jobs. Also, mixing and matching within the clan made forming temporary parties for one-off gigs easier, meaning finding work was more reliable for the individual members. Apparently, lots of adventurers signed up with clans on top of founding parties as core members.

The whole scheme was kind of like a university club—tabletop culture had also done something similar. TRPGs could only be played in numbers, and so people had formed groups to do so: some made organizations big enough to host conventions while others just had a few regular friends in a private group, but in the end, everyone was simply getting people together in their own unique way.

Alas, the actions of people were the same no matter the world, for better *and* for worse.

The Association ladies had given us a stern warning not to associate with clans willy-nilly: some were out to take full advantage of naive rookies.

They'd given us the names of a few in particular to watch out for, and while Clan Laurentius hadn't been mentioned, that was probably just a matter of relativity. Every organization that pulled in new recruits like this was the same.

They wanted a signup fee and a cut of every job. Or if not that, then they wanted to extort us for something we had. Any attempt at refusing would see us brought to a secluded place for punishment and a threat that they'd make it so we could never make it as adventures. The Adventurer's Association could try and make its processes as smooth as it wanted to; it would never outpace the eternal constant that was the fundamental inefficiency of human malice.

Honestly, people really never changed. Maybe I'd let my guard down too much. Staying so long in the patrolled streets of Berylin must have left me desensitized to the reality of danger; I probably should've spent more time in seedier scenes.

I supposed it was too late now. As someone who actually did have a pretty penny to my name, I'd just have to learn this lesson going forward.

For now, though, I'd just have to clean up the mess I'd made. At least this bit of common sense worked no matter where I went.

"Goodness," Margit sighed. "Why must everyone be so hot-headed?"

The targets of her exasperation seemed to include me for some reason, but for the time being I asked her to stay out of range as I checked the grip on my wooden sword.

In adventuring, letting others look down on you was a quick way to put yourself out of work—and I'd known as much before I'd even set off.

[Tips] "Clans" as they pertain to adventuring are a cultural construct local to the western reaches of the Trialist Empire, but similar organizations exist all over the world, albeit under different names. In Marsheim, clans evolved from immigrant adventurers from the north cooperating beyond party lines, and this influence of northern culture led to the naming scheme.

In the present, the scope of clans grows with each passing day.

Information on clan culture had been hard to come by in the capital, but I knew that these kinds of groups existed everywhere. Where there were people, there were social structures; where there were social structures, there were rulers; and rulers demanded tribute for the service of their protection. In exchange, the subjects of said protection enjoyed relative safety and the help of their fellow subjects in order to get ahead.

The scheme was so timeworn that there wasn't anything particularly interesting to note.

"I dunno how to put it," Kevin said. "The boss-lady's tired, I guess."

I'd been led into a courtyard neat enough to give me whiplash from the chaotic mess indoors, and the gnoll adventurer began talking to me as I rolled up my sleeves. He was sitting against a probably-empty barrel and lackadaisically propping his face up with one hand in a way that got under my skin. He had a wild virility that I couldn't replicate as a mensch, and it made him look strong just by standing there.

"I mean, you know how it is. Ogres are, well, y'know."

"Battle-crazy?" I asked.

"Yeah, that."

Simple as the wooden sword was, it wasn't bad. It wasn't bent out of shape and the metal core was properly calibrated to mimic a real blade's center of balance. Though I personally would have preferred it to be a touch shorter, it wasn't so long as to become unwieldy. Besides, I couldn't really complain when the whole point of Hybrid Sword Arts was the idea of using any and everything that came my way.

"But y'see, the boss-lady's strong, but it's just too much for her. Y'know?"

"As in, there aren't enough people to fight?"

"That too, but it's more like... I think ogres just have some kinda hunger that we can't really get."

The man's musings carried great weight as he fixed his eyes on the ogre preparing for battle.

Her massive, baggy shirt could easily have made for a floresiensis tent, but now she'd tied it tight just under her chest. She pulled up her pant legs to her knees and then took a few coils of rope from around her belt to tie them up too. Finally, she pushed back her disheveled hair and fastened it into a somewhat neat bouquet of coppery luster.

Put together, she was remarkably beautiful. Though the sharper contours made her look even more stern, the thin wrinkle encasing her upturned eyes helped to create a powerful air of dignity. A thin but high nose added to this pride, and her giant canines—long even for an ogre—overpowered a pair of lean lips to heighten the intimidation factor all the more.

The woman was a literal femme fatale; if she put on a touch of eyeliner and dressed in Japanese garb, she could play the part of a yakuza matron. It was such a shame that she spent her days drinking on the couch of this rundown tavern.

Evidently, Kevin felt the same way: scratching at his splendid gnoll mane, he let out an indescribably sad sigh.

"'Not enough—it's not enough.' That's all she ever says when she's drinking. But she still knocks us around like a bunch of twigs, so I just don't get it."

"Isn't that normal, though? I'm sure there are parts of gnoll culture that mensch like me can never understand."

"Fair enough. You lot don't have any clue how bad it is to be in the thick of it."

To be "in the thick of it" was a reference to sexual heat, if I recalled. Demihumans with mating seasons had it rough.

"But I came along for the ride because I look up to her strength," Kevin went on. "So I'd be lying if I said I'm all right with how things are now."

"So you toss her any new adventurer who looks like they can handle themselves in the hopes that it'll lift her spirits."

"Pretty much. Used to be that we'd be the ones going in to fight, but we

couldn’t keep that up. No way.”

The man’s nonchalant laughter irked me a bit. Just a bit, mind you. It was just that he was a tough gnoll, and he’d said himself that he couldn’t keep up with his boss; that meant he was well aware of what would happen to a mensch in the same position, considering we were about as squishy as walking blocks of tofu.

“Hey, don’t say I didn’t give you a choice,” he said. “Half of your cash and a tenth of your pay—that’s all it takes to call it quits here and have the boss-lady keep any other goon off you.”

But then again, I supposed that knowledge was the whole reason this protection racket existed to begin with. The two choices on offer were an impossible fight and a steep shakedown. If I dared not to take either, then they’d reduce me to dog food on the spot, or worse, ruin my most key selling point as an adventurer—my *reputation*.

That would be a fatal blow. My opponent may have been an ogre, but adventuring was a trade embroiled in blood; turning tail and running would brand me as a coward anywhere I went.

“I want the boss-lady to let off her steam, but it’s not like I’m a fan of seeing kids get the daylights beat outta them—okay, not *that* much of a fan. Anyway, lemme ask you one last time.”

How many fresh recruits could stand their ground after seeing an ogre swing a sword so huge that it had to have been a custom order? Of them, how many of those courageous souls had gotten away without being made to know their own recklessness?

I didn’t blame those whose spirits had crumbled when faced with the terrifying sound of wood ripping through air. In fact, I imagined a great many had thought to themselves that ten percent wasn’t a bad cut to have this icon of violence backing their efforts.

“You sure you don’t wanna quit?”

But meager as it was, I had my own pride to uphold. I had the two masters I’d studied under and the friends I’d adventured with to honor...and most of all, my

life was the product of the enemies I'd felled. To shamefully back down here would be to throw dirt on all of their memories; I could accept that I was inexperienced, but I would not do them the disservice of claiming I was weak.

"A pretty lady's looking to dance," I said. "I'd have to have nothing between my legs to turn her down."

And I wasn't going to let anyone get that idea in their heads either.

"Heh, have it your way. Knock yourself out, greenhorn. We do know a priest just in case, so we can patch up your broken bones if you've got the coin for it. Well, if we're not picking them up off the ground, that is."

Turning my back on the jeers, I took my place in front of the waiting ogre.

Now that we were face-to-face, it felt like I was up against a solid wall. The size differential was so intimidating that I again couldn't blame anyone who would want to back out at this point.

Still, it was far from despair-inducing. The GM of fate had thrown me into some real bullshit in my years; she would need to be a few notches more monstrous to make me ball up my character sheet.

I'd spent a whole lot of time and effort helping Dietrich just because I'd felt like she was wasting her talents, and here was a woman who reminded me of an old, old acquaintance. It only made sense for me to show her a little kindness.

No words, no greetings, no customary ogre salutation—the fight began with an unannounced attack. The sudden strike came from a relaxed position and swept up; despite looking lazy, it was a precise attack that required all four limbs to be in perfect sync.

I stopped around the uppercut by turning to my left and letting it fly past parallel to my body. Seeing it zip by close enough to take a few strands off my bangs wasn't very good for my heart.

I returned the favor by stabbing with the wooden blade in my right hand. My aim was her left leg, which she'd made the fulcrum of her swing. The step she'd taken toward me put her within my range, despite her being twice my height.

Still turned sideways, I poked at her without moving my core: instead, I flexed my arm and powered a jab with my shoulder and pecs. Though I looked to be using nothing more than my arm, I was pushing off my back leg to drive my attack.

The demonic gold of her irises flashed as her eyes went wide. But then, she reacted brilliantly: kicking up her left leg, she knocked away the tip of my sword.

Steeped in booze or not, a gem was a gem—she had good instincts. Even if I'd been using a real sword, she'd diverted the course well enough that it wouldn't have broken skin.

Finally, some life showed in those listless eyes of hers.

What came next was a counterattack that began before her foot was even back on the ground. Grabbing the blade of her upturned sword with her other hand, she brought her weapon down pommel-first. Using the handle-side of a sword as a blunt weapon was traditionally meant for armored foes, but it could also be a smart way to sustain pressure off of a missed attack.

Nice. Looks like she's starting to get serious.

I ducked under the strike and dipped into her guard with the intent to slice from right underneath her; unfortunately, she immediately kicked at me, and I had to back off.

But all this did was prove to me that she wasn't comfortable fighting in close quarters. She stood with both hands gripping her gargantuan blade, and my landing turned into another step that propelled me right back into her reach.

Ogres were about three meters tall; mensch were anywhere from half to two-thirds their height. All I had to do to understand how annoying it was for her to fight me was imagine myself facing a goblin. Being bipedal naturally meant our legs had to work harder to swing at things placed significantly lower than ourselves, and even then, we couldn't put as much power into a strike as usual.

And if I could imagine that, then all I had to do was fall back on my old motto: *Do whatever your enemies would prefer you didn't.*

Rather than trying to block the tornado of wood whirling around me, I parried

the rushing blade and gained ground. With my Strength, a solid hit would crush me no matter how expertly I tried to catch it. Mass didn't care about skill, and I was content to deflect and dodge.

By the time I'd parried, evaded, and counterattacked a dozen or so times, the crowd began to show some excitement. The clan members who'd stayed inside were starting to file out to watch.

On the whole, they'd probably thought that the duel would only last a few seconds and hadn't bothered. But that the piercing sound of clanging wood hadn't been cut short by a mensch boy's screaming must have piqued their curiosity.

Watch to your hearts' content, but this show won't end the way you're hoping.

I mean, my partner had sat herself down to watch with a bit of jerky she'd gotten while I wasn't looking. I couldn't let this end in a boring way.

The swings were faster; the technique more precise; the attacks more alluring. Despite being a single sword-wielding system from head to toe, the ogre threw in relentless kicks and punches. Up until now, her strikes had been at the level where I arguably could've survived a hit, but any of these would splatter my mensch body like an overripe fruit.

Yet this was no childish frustration taking hold and steering her *away* from moderation. No, this was her body remembering its duty and pulling her *toward* her ogre instincts. Things were heating up in more ways than one, and I was happy to oblige.

I bided my time in an obnoxiously clingy range until I finally found the opening I was looking for: one massive swing meant to throw me off. She probably wanted to regain space and bring the fight back to her favored spacing, but I wasn't so easy.

Arcing death rushed at me from my left, and I stood with my sword ready to catch it. Just as our weapons made contact, I leapt parallel to the ground and her blade both, using the connecting point as the fulcrum for my jump. Skating the length of my sword across her attack, I avoided the strike and held my ground.

It was a risky stunt and I could only afford to be so dramatic, but I'd figured —*correctly*—I could pull it off. Being able to gauge whether any given trick would succeed was my favorite part of fixed-value builds. Nothing was more embarrassing than talking a big game and whiffing, but when a set of snake eyes was the only thing that could stop me from showing off, I was more than willing to indulge.

The sword zipping by nearly pulled me off-balance, but I managed to catch my landing and place the point of my blade just below her right armpit before she could recover from her follow-through. Ogres boasted natural armor in their alloy-infused skin, but this underarm section of the torso was thinly protected, and one stab between the ribs would prove fatal.

She knew the truth just as well as I. Frozen at the end of her arc, she stared down at me without so much as lowering her blade.

I gave her two pats on the side to convey a wordless message: "Satisfied?"

After a few seconds of delay, the members of the crowd began to murmur. Not a single one of them had imagined their boss might *lose*, and as such, it had taken them a second to process what they were seeing.

Mixing into the perplexed voices was one heavy sigh. It was a long, long exhalation that smelled of spirits. After her deep breath, the ogre threw her weapon aside and turned her back to me. She walked over to one corner of the yard, grabbed a pot off a stack of similar pots, threw off its lid, and dumped the contents right on top of herself.

The pot had been full of plain water, probably as a firefighting tool. Once she was done dramatically showering herself, she scooped a handful of what remained and took a big gulp. Carelessly slamming down the fragile breakable, she scooped up her soaking hair and shouted.

"Kevin!"

"Wha—yes'm?!"

"Get me my swords!"

Tasked with an order, the gnoll scrambled back inside and the sounds of him rummaging through clutter could be heard until he reemerged. He'd brought

with him a pair of wooden swords: one was about two sizes smaller than what the ogre had been wielding thus far, and the other was even smaller than that.

He gingerly offered them to his boss. She took them and, in an instant, her whole demeanor changed.

Aha. The classic ogre longsword wasn't actually her weapon of choice. She'd been competent, to be sure, but not *serious.* Those blades, on the other hand, were the real deal—that was what she'd built herself on. They were the arms that she knew better than the back of her hand.

Two swords was an odd choice. I'd never seen anyone dual-wield before. It matched up poorly against shielded foes, so the style was practically unheard of in the western half of the continent.

But if that was how she'd made her name as an adventurer, then it had to be real...which meant using one unfamiliar blade was going to prove difficult.

"Here you are. Looking for this?"

Before I could do a thing, though, Margit snuck up on me with a small shield from gods-knew-where in hand.

"Thanks. You know me too well."

"You're very welcome. Finding this was a paltry errand if it means you'll put on an even more terrific show for me."

I thanked her for the thoughtful gesture with a courteous bow, and she followed suit by pinching her skirt for a curtsy. I really was lucky to have such an understanding companion.

The ogre waited for us to finish our little exchange, but once Margit scurried off, she appeared before me with both swords in hand. She brought the handle of the longer one in her right hand up to her forehead—an honorable salutation for when a warrior's hands were full. Though the custom's origins were different from those on Earth, I found it funny that the meaning and motions were familiar to me.

"Allow me to apologize for the dishonor of striking without so much as an introduction, newcomer. My name is Laurentius—Laurentius the Free of the

Gargantuan Tribe. Will you do me the honor of naming yourself?”

She spoke in an artless, masculine Rhinian, but her respect came through in spades. The spirit of liquor was gone, replaced with the dignity of an ogre warrior.

Hiding my surprise that she hailed from the same tribe as my old acquaintance, I mimicked her salutation and introduced myself.

“Erich of Konigstuhl, son of Johannes.”

My introduction was a short one, and it would stay that way until I earned a name for myself through my own exploits. But I had no need for shame: mine was a name worth announcing with pride.

“Very well, Erich of Konigstuhl. I can see you seem ready to go, but let me say this as a matter of courtesy. I have already lost once—whether the first bout was serious or not, I know nothing can be more shameful than to ask for another chance. But I still ask: will you accept another duel?”

I answered with a thrust of my sword.

Talk was cheap. The only conversation worth having was one with our blades.

[Tips] Ogre society places emphasis on tribal relations; no ogres possess family names. However, warriors are given epithets that also double as delineators of class. The Gargantuan Tribe that Lauren and Laurentius hail from has five tiers. In ascending order, they are the Bold, the Free, the Unyielding, the Valiant, and the Stalwart.

Martial skill sufficiently honed seems to the outside observer a dance.

“Whoa?! How the hell did he dodge that?!”

“The shield... Did you see his shield get yanked away, or was that just me? How come he didn’t get hit after that?”

“You dumbass. He kicked away Boss’s sword while he was flying back!”

“What kinda mensch can *do that*?! You sure the kid ain’t a goblin or something?!”

“Don’t you pin that kinda crazy move on size! I’m a goblin, not a damn *alf*. Anyone who tries that should be dead to rights no matter how big!”

Some could follow the action, others could catch glimpses, and others still saw nothing at all; varied as the responses were, everyone was watching with clenched fists.

This was a performance of sword and shield—ah, a correction. The swords were not real, but simple replicas. Though perhaps such a distinction was meaningless when the blurred wood still represented death in one blow.

Swordplay with two weapons was, at least in the western reaches of the Central Continent, a rarity. The only swords seen in battle were great zweihanders and longswords paired with shields.

To wield a sword with one hand was already a challenge, even on one’s dominant side, requiring a high baseline level of strength and stability just to swing. Logically, it followed that to wield a sword in *each* hand was difficult beyond imagination.

Further, the reward was to have a weapon in one’s clumsy off-hand at the cost of a protective shield. It was little wonder why the style never caught on, with how few the benefits seemed. Without two-handed leverage, a swordsman would struggle to knock away enemy shields; without a shield of one’s own, they would struggle to defend themselves; and when facing off against a greatsword with two arms’ power behind it, blocking would become a tremendous challenge.

As an art, it offered mediocrity in every field, save perhaps for appearances. Arguably, a grand enough display could intimidate an opponent.

It was obvious why the Empire and its neighbors saw few dual-wielding swordsmen in their lands...but these flaws were only the surface layer of the craft—a surface layer that only pertained to those who did not have the *build* for it.

“Graaah!”

A husky shout set the air a-tremble, numbing the ears of all who heard it. Two blades flew about alongside the battlecry, though not in unison: the right

longsword launched a pinpoint strike only for the left to cover any opening caused by a shift in posture.

The shorter blade constantly flickered to just where it was needed to support its longer companion. Fluid trails of steel blended into unbroken arcs of raw motion—each an attack, defense, and the connections in between.

Dual-wielding was an exquisite skill that went beyond merely doubling the number of swords. By manipulating the two weapons in tandem, one could create an unceasing barrage of offense. The right had the power and precision to tilt, crush, or slice through shields; the left had the freedom to take opportunistic jabs and cover openings.

Most who had crossed these blades had been unable to see through the unfamiliar maneuvers and cracked in a few exchanges. Of the few who hadn't, most had been overwhelmed before being able to come up with a means of fighting back. An art of swordplay built on a sound foundation in a land where its methods were unknown threatened death at first sight even in its most basic form.

Oh, those pitiful souls. They would never know that this skill had been honed solely to challenge one lofty champion.

"Huh? No, wait—*no way*. How'd he dodge that?!"

"Wait, what happened?! I couldn't see anything 'cause the boss was in the way!"

"I'm pretty sure the brat just kicked *off of* Boss's sword!"

"The hell are you on about?! I swear I saw the sword go *straight through* him!"

Yet the little warrior with his sword and shield did not flinch as he navigated the maelstrom of blades. He parried and dodged at every turn, and when a blow connected, he rolled off the momentum and avoided more lethal follow-ups. The timing of his footwork was perfect down to fractions of a second, leaving the afterimage of boy and blade intermingling; his shield was placed so immaculately that it hardly raised a sound as it gently guided the dual blades away.

He had yet to take a clean hit and showed no intentions of sullying that record. Harder to pin down than a mirage, at certain angles it almost seemed as if the blows passed right through him. At this point, it would have been easier for the onlookers to believe that this performance was some kind of scam.

The members of the crowd knew just how strong their leader was, and a curious tension was palpable in the air between them. Here was a fresh adventurer who'd just gotten his badge, unveiling unthinkable talents...but he was still *mensch*. The slightest mistake would cost him his life. The two halves blended together to create an indescribable suspense that hung over all the spectators.

That is, all but one.

One young arachne was leisurely sitting on a barrel and hogging one of the best sightlines in the yard for herself. In her hand was a bit of unattended jerky she'd helped herself to; it was far too salty to call good meat, but it would do as a snack while she watched the others clamor.

Everyone else was losing their mind, but she knew one simple truth: the boy with the sword and shield was still totally composed.

Forget lethal blows—he had yet to even take any real punishment. Despite all his *seemingly* painful tumbles across the dirt, he'd clearly dispersed most of the impacts throughout the ground itself. He probably had a few bruises and scrapes, but nothing that would leave a mark.

Besides, all she had to do was look at him. He almost certainly didn't realize it, but his lips were curled into a grin wider than the crescent moon. The boy was a certified battle junkie in his own right, even if he would never admit it.

The arachne maiden had seen this boy proudly march into danger to unveil the fruits of his labor time and time again. His actions in combat seemed almost like a statement of his efforts: it was as if he didn't like fighting itself, but rather *his own sheer prowess.*

Truthfully, he worried her sometimes. The boy had agreed to this duel on the grounds of "cleaning up after his own messes," but it seemed to her a sugar-coated excuse to indulge his bloody instincts. Surely they could have found a way to escape or to avoid the fight, but he had taken the initiative to take the

shortest path toward conflict. What could she call this behavior if not battle-crazed?

On the other hand, how was the ogre faring? Well, she hadn't suffered any clean hits either, but one look at her tightly pursed lips was enough to glean the truth. That she had yet to break down the boy's defenses had clearly left her at a loss.

Rather, the figure dancing in her eyes was no fleeting mensch adolescent: it was an infinite vacuum, an unknowable leviathan channeled through a sword and shield. The skills she'd polished were simply not enough: not her masterful dance of doubled blades, nor her perfectly executed feints, nor even her parrying technique capable of diverting ogre greatswords.

The boy's weapon crissed and crossed, leaving shallow traces worming over the surface of her skin. Each mark fueled the ogre's sense of incompetence, which, in turn, fueled her rage.

None of the hits had been substantial enough for either duelist to justify a break in combat, but a warrior had her pride. Yes, these scratches would have been non-issues had she been armored, but the very idea that she'd suffered damage became mental baggage for her to carry.

"Well, aren't we having fun?"

The mumbling girl was positively enraptured as she watched her childhood companion fight on. As a huntress, she understood the ego involved in matters of life and death—the satisfaction of proving one's skill by triumphing over a challenging rival. It was a joy unknown to those who simply preyed on the weak. Hunting rabbits was a facet of the job, of course, but it would never compare to bringing down a wolf in a hard-fought chase.

Today, the boy had found a foe whom he could enjoy himself against. *Good for him.*

"***Whoa?!***"

The yard quaked as the crowd erupted in unison. A powerful blow had destroyed the boy's shield and scattered the bits to the wind. Finally, the tides had turned, and it would be their boss who would take home the victory.

“Oh, Erich... I see you were enjoying yourself a smidge *too* much.”

Yet it was not meant to be: the shield was not the only thing twirling through air. Half a beat later, the shorter sword in the ogre’s off-hand went flying.

Amidst the endless whirlwind of violence, the boy had slipped his blade into the tiniest of openings. Like a silent serpent, his blade had slithered over to strike at the pommel of the ogre’s weapon.

Having been partially disarmed, both parties jumped back and locked eyes. They stared one another down, gauging the situation...until they lowered their weapons in unison.

The spectators’ excitement turned to confusion at once. They could go on, couldn’t they? Why were they stopping? They both had their main arms remaining, right?

Only the huntress and a few other silent members of the crowd knew the truth. For a swordsman, loss of equipment was akin to loss in battle. While they would have fought to the end had this been a true duel to the death, there was no escaping the label of defeat in a more sportsmanlike setting.

In this fateful moment, *both* of the competitors had lost.

[Tips] Dual-wielding is a style of swordplay that, as the name suggests, revolves around the use of two blades. The benefits it provides are heavily outweighed by its prerequisite skill, and there are few practitioners of the craft.

Of the limited schools of dual-wielding found in the western reach, the main tradition is to use one’s right-hand weapon for primary attacks and one’s left-hand weapon as a supplemental tool.

There's nothing more embarrassing than losing because you got cocky.

Pulling my stinging left hand back, I placed the wooden sword on my forehead as a show of respect.

If you'll allow me to defend myself for a moment: I hadn't been sandbagging. Okay, sure, foregoing spells pretty much entirely defeated the point of my build at a fundamental level, but my master in magic had been the one to ban their use. Could you blame me?

Besides, once she'd switched to wielding dual blades, I had hardly been able to consider my opponent's skills "wasted."

Truth be told, I'd made light of her: *was a dual-wielder really anything to worry about?* I'd wondered. There simply weren't any practitioners around these parts. Not only did it match up poorly against polearms and war axes, but *Sir Lambert* had warned us that he'd seen many a fighter try it in the past only to later discover that it was all style and no substance. When a man who'd survived the horrors of war had written it off, it was hard not to be skeptical.

Yet oh, how wrong I'd been.

Gods, was Miss Laurentius a menace. Her technique was perfectly tuned to her inherent strength and made for a terrific final package. In her main hand she wielded what would ordinarily be a zweihander—at no loss of power—so expertly that she'd not only intercepted my attacks, but parried them. Meanwhile, her off-hand had been precisely scooping at my shield to peel away my defenses.

This was not two swords strapped onto the back of brute ogre strength. It was an unwavering understanding of sword logic, internalized as her own skill.

But it wasn't only her swordplay that impressed me: her footwork was brilliant. Always occupying positions that had been just too uncomfortable to get a good swing at, her honed movements could surely let her deflect the brutal violence of ogre greatswords even with her relatively small weapons.

So this is her full strength. I wondered how things would have turned out had I been using my own buckler, casting spells, and wielding the blade I knew best. Argh, it was at times like these when Lady Agrippina's assignment truly got

under my skin.

If only I hadn't had these bags of sand weighing me down, I was sure our battle would have made my heart soar even higher.

That said, I felt like my performance was less real sandbagging and more an instance of prioritizing style. I'd given it my all as a swordsman. While I had to admit that I'd tested out a bunch of different ideas, since it was my first time against a dual-wielder, I had no reservations in saying that I'd done my best.

Plus, I managed to Disarm her at the very last moment. Not that it mattered when I had lost my shield first, but still.

This world really was a combo-oriented system: even with my double Scale IXs, I still couldn't breeze my way through fights. The road to the summit looked long, and I'd have to treat this defeat as a stepping stone on my way to the top.

"A splendid performance, Erich." Miss Laurentius the ogre swordsman returned my salute and, unbelievably, said, "It's my loss."

"Huh?"

What the hell is she talking about?

Ignoring my befuddlement, she put out her left hand. Looking closer, her pinky and ring fingers were bent in a worrying direction.

Oh, shit. I thought I'd managed to cleanly knock out the handle, but it looked like it had snagged on her hand.

"My fingers are out of their sockets," she said. "They aren't broken, but this is proof that you scored a clean hit."

Apparently, my Disarmament had dislocated two of her fingers. On my side, I'd let go of the shield in time to avoid a similar fate.

My worries seemed unfounded, though: she grabbed the wayward digits with her other hand and forcefully jerked them back into place. They made a *gruesome* sound...but maybe ogre joints were as tough as the rest of their bodies?

"But I was the first to lose my arms," I said, "and my left hand is paralyzed and won't be in usable condition for some time. Surely it must be *my* loss."

Yet no matter what damage she'd taken, the truth was as I'd just said. Had the duel continued, I wouldn't have had the option of switching to a two-handed style or trying to pick the shield back up. I couldn't even feel whether or not my fingers were properly attached to my hand.

"Don't be ridiculous," she argued. "The pinky is the fulcrum of grip: I wouldn't have been able to swing a sword properly with it twisted, and I know you wouldn't be forgiving enough to let me pop it back into place in the middle of combat. We've already seen how things end with one sword apiece—I don't intend to shamelessly ignore the truth."

"But it would take time for my sense of touch to return. I'm not deft enough to cross swords with you while compensating for a paralyzed left half."

Our back-and-forth of "No, *I* lost!" went on for a few more rounds until the crowd managed to push past their confusion to suggest that we both accept defeat. Even with their suggestion, we still couldn't work out a solution.

After all, no warrior wanted to acknowledge a draw.

There were, of course, situations on the battlefield where a fight would fizzle out without a clear victor. However, this was a one-on-one duel in a sterilized environment where one good hit marked the end of combat. How could I ever accept a draw in a situation like this, especially when the order of who lost their off-hand equipment first was so clear?

Swordsmen were stubborn creatures, and that was doubly true for a prideful ogre. Truthfully, wins were easy to unhand, but losses were worth clinging to until one's dying breath; the path of the blade was tread upon off the lessons of defeat.

After a long debate, we were no closer to an agreement and were not in a condition to run the duel back.

"...Fine, then." With a sly grin, the ogre slicked back her wet hair and said, "Let's settle this another way."

"Another way?"

I cocked my head, confused at how a duel between swordsmen could be settled without crossing swords. Miss Laurentius almost began to speak when,

suddenly, a stray thought stopped her in her tracks.

“Wait... Excuse me. Did you say Erich of *Konigstuhl*?”

“Uh, yes. As I said in my introduction.”

The color drained from her face. Ogre skin naturally shifted to the hue of a clear blue sky when happy or excited, and a dark navy when less so.

Placing a hand on her chin, she began muttering to herself inaudibly. Had she noticed something wrong? I could swear I heard the clattering of dice somewhere, but this wasn’t about to turn into cosmic horror, was it?

“Would you happen to know a Lauren from the same Gargantuan Tribe as me, by any chance?”

Miss Laurentius squeezed the words out like they’d gone through a press, but all they represented for me was a nostalgic name. Not only did I know Lauren, but I’d just been reminiscing on the memory. How could I ever forget the woman who’d egged me on to try the helm-splitting challenge—and who’d indirectly ruined my brother’s ability to stand on even ground with his wife? Even now, Elisa loved to gaze into the big pearl I’d won for her whenever she had some time to herself.

Oh, of course! Miss Laurentius had said she was from the Gargantuan Tribe too; they must have hailed from the same place. Fate was a funny thing.

I answered by telling the helm-splitting story from my childhood, but that only worsened her complexion. I wonder what kind of history they had.

“L-Let’s drink!”

“Huh?”

“We’ll settle this duel over drinks!”

Suddenly, she grabbed my shoulder and began pushing me back in toward the bar. I tried to stand my ground so I could get a read on what was happening, but my heels did little more than kick up dust.

“Kevin!”

“Yes’m?!”

“Bring my liquor! The special stuff! Tonight’s tab is on me!”

“Wha—huh? Booze? You want me to get booze?!”

“That’s right! And not the usual cheap crap! Ebbo, go get us fish! Don’t make the old man cook—head out and find us meat, and lots of it! I’ll even pay for a whole cow!”

“Yes, boss!”

The clan leader tossed the money pouch tied at her belt—a “pouch” only by ogre standards—at her subordinates, and the lowlier adventurers all scrambled off to see to their tasks. Those who were still around rushed to clean up the interior as soon as their boss barked at them.

Huh? What’s going... Just, huh?!

I was absolutely stumped. Things were moving along without my understanding; the whole situation had taken on a bit of an absurd cast, from where I was standing.

As I was thinking, Margit hopped onto my neck with her trademark pounce. *Hey, wait, I’m sweaty. Can you wait?*

“Why not take up the offer?” she said. “Drinks aren’t free every day, you know.”

“Sure, but—”

“I suspect our host won’t be budging any time soon.” Wriggling around, she plopped her chin on my shoulder to face Miss Laurentius behind me. “Isn’t that right?”

For some unknowable reason, my earring jingled, and I felt a cold shock run straight down my spine...

[Tips] Ogre culture places emphasis on producing strong children.

I’d forgotten what good liquor tastes like, the ogre thought as the burning spirits wetted her eye.

Born in the west, Laurentius's first bath as a newborn was a tub of water in an encampment tent, just like so many others of her kind. If anything about her was different, it was that she considered herself a failure.

Although she'd grown tired of counting the years around fifty, she'd charged through over eighty lines of defenders in over twenty wartime battles, not to mention how she'd participated in north of sixty duels. After the tribe council had bestowed the rank of "the Free" upon her, she'd taken eighteen more heads.

Those had been good days. She had become a warrior—as only women could be warriors, none would dare demean an ogre by calling her a warrio*ess*—relatively quickly, and her life had been smooth sailing around the time she'd gotten her title.

Alas, she had not been alone. The woman who'd knelt beside her on the day of the ceremony as the new warriors were sworn in had been the worst possible match.

Her name was Lauren—nowadays, Lauren the Valiant. Precious few warriors ever reached the penultimate title of reverence within their tribe, and she was one of them.

The two ogres had been born to the same generation, and they'd trained as if they were in direct competition with each other. When was it then, Laurentius wondered, that she had found herself no longer able to keep up?

She lost in strength; she lost in height; she lost in honors; she lost in fight.

Realizing that she had hit a wall, Laurentius had studied a dual-wielding style under a foreign master. Yet just as she'd felt as though she was gaining ground, her rival had brought home the head of a foe sung about in songs and legends to earn a new title—she had now lost in rank, as well.

With nothing to lose, she'd put everything on the line to challenge Lauren to one final duel...only to be utterly trampled. Heartbroken, she'd slammed her fist into the ground until it bled as if to ask if her life had amounted to anything at all. But what stung more to this day were those three jolly words: "A fine fight."

A fine fight? What part of the fight had been fine? Had she possessed the resolve to throw away her final bit of decency as an ogre, Laurentius would have liked to grab her opponent by the collar and ask these questions burning within her soul.

Leaving only the bitter taste of defeat in her wake, the indomitable Lauren had then leisurely ventured off to tour the lands.

Laurentius followed, as if to give chase—or perhaps to escape the eyes of her people. She could no longer remember why she'd chosen the same destination.

So too was it difficult to answer why she'd foregone the life of a mercenary and instead settled into adventuring. Was it fear? Or perhaps it was the unsightly clinging of a woman who could not bring herself to forsake the path of a warrior in its entirety. Regardless, it wasn't as if she could put bread on the table through any means but violence—but come to think of it, her days of impoverished adventuring were a distant memory.

The color of the tag dangling at her neck meant nothing to her, but it was now a vivid blue. At some point or another she'd realized she had lackeys, and after leaving them to their own devices, she'd found herself leading a clan. It had been around then that money began to flow whether she worked or not.

Of course, she still did work. But it had been a long time since news of a worthy foe had spurred her to pick a fight. Instead, she merely tossed around her henchmen to keep them sharp and played with whatever young blood they picked out as offerings. These were comfortable days spent under a film of rust.

And all at once, the stagnant mire had been blown away.

The sensation of wood on her side struck her like lightning; her fingers popped out with the passion of an embrace. The long forgotten euphoria of drowning in pure *battle*, so native to the ogre soul, once again washed over her. After all this time of pushing it away, of fleeing from it, the taste of combat sat indescribably on her palate—a thousand words would not do a fragment of the experience justice.

Here was a liquor worth a drachma per bottle, and not even it could match the rich flavor enveloping her. Defeat was so frustrating, so painful...yet so sweet. It was in that moment that she'd realized that this was simply an ogre's

fate.

Her only regret was that the duel had not been one of mortal stakes. Wood was lacking: life could only be lived at the end of steel. Worse yet, she had been plenty capable of dealing a deathblow, despite encountering no such danger herself. That left a sourness not even the finest whiskey could wash away.

But what vexed her most of all was her opponent. The boy awkwardly lapping at his drink in the next seat over hadn't gotten to show his full power either.

"Hm? Do you not like northern liquors? This is a personal favorite of mine."

"I'm sorry. My tongue isn't fully mature yet, it seems."

The fault lay with her: she hadn't been strong enough to *draw out* his true strength. She had no intention of making excuses about her weaponry; the boy, too, had been using a wooden sword and had wielded it to perfection.

Yet whether she made excuses or not, it was disappointing that she hadn't gotten to see the depth of his skills. Her heart stirred, yearning for a duel to the death.

Amidst their mock battle, she'd noticed a curiosity about his movements—a hesitation borne from unconsciously seeking opportunities for a tool not in hand. As with any good warrior, he must have had an ace up his sleeve that he'd wished to use.

Laurentius downed her drink with the hope that she'd get to see what he was hiding one day—even if it meant being on the receiving end.

"Not enough..."

Yet as of now, she was far from satisfied. It was such a shame that she'd managed to heighten her mood so much without any means of appeasing this burning excitement.

"More, Boss? Just say the word."

"Huh? Ah, sure. Thanks."

The subordinate dutifully waiting on her poured out another cupful of golden liquid, but the wobbling liquor was not where her heart laid.

Alas, she couldn't indulge in what she truly wished to sample. The fleeting pleasure was simply not worth the consequences—rather, she was *already* in a serious predicament.

To begin with, ogres were a battle-hungry people. The rational parts of their minds had kept them from tearing themselves apart by only the slimmest of margins; it followed that the entirety of their culture was centered around violence.

One practice of their brutal culture was the spit trade.

There was no cause that could arouse more single-minded passion than vengeance, and in the olden days, ogres had boasted a terrifically depraved custom: they'd gone around purposefully leaving survivors to generate vengeful fighters. Everything from their proud introductions on the battlefield to their tribal rallying cries were a message to those they left behind, shamelessly coaxing them into taking revenge.

But nothing could withstand the power of a grudge. In the distant past lost even to oral tradition, the ogres' hubris had brought ruin upon them. The famed eighty-two tribes once spoken of in reverence now numbered only thirty-one.

Recognizing that arrogance would be their downfall, the ogres abandoned the distasteful practice—though not entirely. The longstanding tradition of singling out a future foe lived on in the form of a kiss.

An ogre's lips were sacred, second only to the hand that held her sword. It was with her mouth that a warrior announced her names: her tribe's, her ancestors', and her own. When the end approached, her final tribute to her mortal opponent was ever a compliment of words.

To allow another to touch such sacrosanct grounds carried far more weight than it did for other peoples. Its meaning was as clear as it was absolute: *This is my prey. Touch it and you die.*

A worthy opponent was, in some ways, a being more precious than one's own parents. It followed that ogres defended their claims with great intensity: at times, they were known to take the lives of their own flesh and blood over an unrespected mark.

The gravity of the custom led ogres to send letters home on the rare occasions they traded spit. From there, the news would be redirected to absent members of the tribe and further to contacts in other tribes, until all the ogres of the land could be sure to know of their stake. Only by a radical stroke of misfortune, then, would an ogre lose her chosen mark.

Laurentius could vividly remember her surprise when she'd heard Lauren had found a foe worth claiming. At the time she'd wondered what kind of unimaginable monster could pique the interest of the godly warrior.

It was strange to think that the monster was now sitting right beside her.

As fun as this episode had been, Laurentius could not escape the lingering fear encroaching on her heart. An ogre's spit trade was not something to take lightly: though their duel had only been a casual one, the fact that she could have broken the boy was reason enough to draw Lauren's ire.

What would happen if *the* Lauren let loose her blade in a fit of fury? The thought caused Laurentius's gut to shrivel away. And if she dared to sample more than his taste in battle...

As a reward for managing to dig up the critical memory in time despite her drunken haze, Laurentius knocked back her drink and washed away the sour feeling.

The boy placed an empty glass down at the same time. Although the spirits were strong enough to knock a mensch out cold by now, he still looked perfectly sober. The ogre didn't know whether to praise him for drinking well or tease him for acting tough for his age.

"Anyway." Laurentius took a sip from her freshly refilled cup and changed the subject. "Are you sure you don't want to join my clan?"

The boy had turned down this offer once already, just before they'd sat down at the bar. Since they'd both insisted on their own defeat, he'd argued, it would only be fair that he at least not be forced to join.

For Laurentius, this clan had been built around her without her own knowing, and she didn't really care about it. The only reason she played her part as leader was because she would feel bad about shooing away all those who'd gathered

under her.

As much of a bother as it was, she'd always sobered up and represented the group whenever her subordinates needed her to. Every so often, they'd get a request specifically because of their manpower, and she'd have to sort herself out to lead them as a general. A few of her more ambitious men even asked for help with their training, and she'd taught them a thing or two in her spare time.

However, none of that was why she'd invited Erich. You see, if he was one of her subordinates, then no one could blame her for overseeing his practice routines, could they?

Unfortunately, he shook his head flatly.

"I have a promise to keep."

"A promise?"

He squinted down at the girl drunkenly curled up on his lap. She'd tagged along when Laurentius announced they'd settle the matter over drinks, only to conk out pretty much immediately. Despite being chosen by the most frightening of ogres, the boy seemed gentle now as he played with her hair.

"We decided to set off and become adventurers together. I want to see how far we can get with just the two of us, at least to start."

Laurentius's eyes drooped down as well. Though the ogre considered herself a failure, she smiled as she watched the pair. "Then I won't get in your way."

[Tips] Spit trades are a traditional means of signifying a claim among ogres. The ritualistic kiss signals to one's battle-starved sistren that they are not to pluck the fruit while it is still unripe.

By the time eight bottles of whiskey were opened and emptied, my stomach could take no more and I gave up.

I couldn't help it—we just weren't built the same. Ogres towered at over three meters tall; that was anywhere from fifty to a hundred percent bigger than a mensch, and the sizes of our guts scaled similarly. Physically speaking,

their capacity to drink was in a different league. I'd put back as much liquor as my liver could process, making sure to expel as much of the fluid as possible—from the right direction, of course—but I'd never stood a chance when my opponent could do the exact same things.

That said, things ended inconclusively because I had at least not passed out. That didn't sound like a very workable ruleset to me, but I was just counting my luck that I hadn't been made to puke to fit in more booze.

I had no interest in acting like a Roman patrician, after all. Besides, hurling didn't magically undo everything: the stress would constrict my stomach, the bile would burn my throat, and my brain would take the act as a signal that something was wrong and actually make me start feeling sick.

As painful as it was to leave this duel unsettled, Miss Laurentius was gracious enough to say we ought not force ourselves to the point of disrespecting our own food and drink. So we came to a compromise: to prove that I wasn't secretly plastered, I would need to show that I could still wield a sword.

Even with my Heavy Drinker trait, putting on a one-man show of swordplay with all this alcohol sloshing around my body proved quite the experience. Worse still, I tried to excuse myself after a quick performance, only to have Miss Laurentius join me in a drunken craze. Unsheathing her two real blades, she spun around and around, drawing arcs of glimmering steel; though her movements were largely the same as those from this afternoon, it was clear from the gap in polish that these were the weapons she'd entrusted with her life.

We danced, the tips of our blades just barely not crossing. For how long, I could no longer remember: I could believe that it had only been a few minutes, but the indescribable high and the fatigue seeping into my muscles told me it might have been a few hours.

What a strange day.

In part as compensation for my performance, Margit and I were given a room on the second floor for free. It was a simple bedroom, but staggeringly clean weighed against the chaotic mess that was the first floor.

The sheets may not have been *laundered*, but they weren't terribly stained,

and they weren't so bad that lice fell out as soon as I picked them up. Taking a cursory sniff, the bed didn't even smell. Evidently, they'd pulled out their finest lodging for us.

Not that I'd ever make this our main inn, though.

Having long since fallen asleep for the night, Margit got put into bed first. She'd been snoozing on my lap from about the beginning of the drinking contest until I'd gotten up for the sword-dance. After that, she'd woken up for a short while to watch my performance, though her eyes had remained plainly droopy. But once everything was over, she'd reached her limit and gone straight back to sleep—and was thus my excuse for slipping out of the party.

Actually, maybe this had all been a part of her plan to help me along: everything from overdrinking at the outset to sleeping soundly now.

I mean, she was a huntress, and far warier than me for it. We may have gotten friendly with the denizens of this tavern, but there was no way she'd let her guard down like this when we still weren't sure how much we could trust them.

Margit's breaths were deep and peaceful—her weakness to alcohol was as unfeigned as ever—as I undid her hair and the first buttons of her collar and skirt to make her more comfortable. Freed from its confines, her adventurer's badge slipped out. Tied on simple string and completely black, the little metal plaque had no value...except to prove we were adventurers.

Man... We really made it. As reality settled in once again, a paralyzing sense of joy tingled in my brain.

I removed the flat plank of wood on the windowsill and looked up at the sky. Much time had passed: the moon was high among the stars. Tonight's moon was a waning crescent, slowly approaching novelty—once, I had called this form kin.

Ha, I smiled to myself. *Took long enough to finish my character sheet.*

[Tips] Character creation is a process in which players write out the details of their avatars on character sheets. This is not limited to stats and skills, but

also includes personal history, like why a PC might have ended up in a position to partake in the campaign to begin with.

On my first morning as an adventurer, I was greeted not by the refreshing light of dawn, but the depressing dark of rain. Was it just me, or was fate really trying to piss all over my new beginnings?

My childhood companion was not enjoying the shift in weather, nor was she liking how long the spirit of liquor was overstaying its welcome. Still, we went downstairs to find the remnants of last night's chaos plain to see.

Rather, the breakfast being served was made up entirely out of leftovers. No one would serve meals this hearty in the morning otherwise. Then again, maybe the cultural influence of non-Rhinian peoples in the area meant full meals were acceptable after waking up around here.

"So, basically." Ebbo sat across the table from us, wetting a stale loaf of black bread in tomato soup as he tried to push past his hangover. "Pretty much every clan has a tavern they rope off for themselves. I mean, you can still spend a night in one even if you're not a member, but it won't be the friendliest place, is all I'm saying."

From what I could gather, Miss Laurentius must have ordered him to teach us about how things worked around town. The boss herself, meanwhile, was loudly snoring on her VIP-reserved sofa. As I'd already remarked, the description of a "waste of beauty" truly did fit her well; I had half a mind to run a comb through her hair, wipe down her face, and put a proper coat of makeup on her.

Wait, no. Years of diligently serving a noblewoman must have warped my instincts when it came to tending to others. In my last life, the thought of waiting on a slovenly lady had belonged strictly to the realm of fetishistic daydreams, but here it just felt like work. Forget Miss Laurentius's sloppiness, this was all the fault of one unsalvageable scoundrel who was so damn lazy she couldn't be bothered to put on clothes after she bathed.

Curse you, Lady Agrippina! You've ruined my common sense!

I needed to pull myself together. Looking after myself was going to be enough

of a challenge; pampering someone else was out of the question.

"I know it's rich coming from me," Ebbo went on, "but we're a pretty fair place considering how big our clan is. We don't take *all* your cash as an entry fee, we don't haze the newbies, and we don't make anyone run off and pick losing fights."

"Do others actually do that?" I asked.

"'*Course* they do. These tags on our necks are the only thing between us and a pack of gangsters, okay? Just so you know, half of all your cash is us being soft—other places make dumb kids take out loans to prove their loyalty. Here, you pay whatever you can and the boss won't say a thing as long as you buckle down and do your job."

Put that way, I could see his point. Sellswords hired by the day weren't exactly dependable, and putting a bunch of them together would see ethics evaporate faster than spirits.

"I won't talk any dirt, but there're a few you gotta steer clear of. Around here, the main ones are..."

The first was the Exilrat: composed of the vagabonds who camped outside the city walls, they were known for having a large workforce that did honest work. However, the leadership took a *sixty* percent cut, making the whole system a nightmarish cycle of poverty.

Next, there was a half-abandoned district in the northern parts of the city—as a former Berylinian citizen, the thought that a whole district could be abandoned was shocking—that had been seized by the Baldur Clan. Though they were roughly the same size as Clan Laurentius on paper, they represented a different kind of danger: rumor had it their leader was a mage who dabbled in less-than-reputable substances.

But the most notorious group had to be the Heilbronn Familie. Made up of dyed-in-the-wool criminals, their recruitment policies were horrific. One had to either pay all their savings, endure a harsh hazing ritual, or...

"...kidnap someone and put them down with your own two hands—or so I hear. No doubt about it: those guys are nuts."

“Why in the world is a group like that allowed to roam freely?” Margit rightfully questioned. Her head must have hurt, as she was rubbing her temple with her left hand and restlessly poking at a plate of beans with her right.

“To begin with,” I added, “why would anyone *want* to join them?”

“Well, duh. It costs too much to stamp ’em out. And as for the recruits, well... I don’t get it, but some people just wanna walk around town like they own the place.”

This time, the answer came from Kevin, who walked over with a shockingly large number of skewers in his hand. He’d probably been reheating them in the yard; they dribbled with oil as he bit into one and continued explaining.

“Lots of dumbasses think that if they join up with a real killer, then people’ll start licking their boots. Not that it’ll give ’em the balls to pick a fight with us, though.”

Many adventurers acknowledged that our craft was one step shy of thuggery, but this crossed the line into completely literal territory. It didn’t even have the ritualistic chivalry of an established mafia; this was closer to an upstart cartel.

“Basically, the lord won’t lift a finger as long as we stay in our lane. The margrave’s not gonna go wasting cash on wanderers and immigrants who don’t pay taxes anyway, and trying to police a bunch of adventurers and mercs is a hassle. They’d have to start razing the whole town to get a response.”

“Plus, the lord’s not gonna let his precious little personal army get hurt on patrol, yeah?”

“Pretty much. Unlike us, a dead soldier costs money, I think. They’ll let the Familie slide so long as they don’t start messing up the city. Dodging trouble unless you *have* to deal with it is a big part of being a bigwig.”

In short, evil was permissible on relatively small scales.

I supposed I could understand. There really wasn’t much benefit to rounding up a gang of crooks. One could argue about the public good all they wanted, but we lived in an age where “out of sight, out of mind” was the baseline of criminal policy. The only way a local lord could justify the expense was if it directly impacted their own reputation.

Put another way, nobles were managers trying to create profitable territories; they had no time for unprofitable ventures. Just look at the magistrate who'd appeared in Fidelio's saga. Unlike virtuous heroes, policemen and patrols had to be continuously paid to keep the peace.

Things had been different in the capital on account of its diplomatic nature, but that logic went out the window on a wild frontier where discord and growth went hand in hand. At the end of the day, there was no stamping out the bedlam of the borderlands; it was understandable why the authorities would prefer to just wish it away.

Rather, it was likely that the government was *earning* money in the form of bribes, and the exchange probably came with a nifty set of pawns for its troubles. Adventurers or not, there were plenty of ne'er-do-wells willing to take care of problems under the table for the right price.

So long as the human condition persisted, it seemed our tales would ever remain the same. No world was free of evil, so the rule was just to keep that evil to an acceptable margin.

What a mess.

"Thank you very much for the information," I said. "We'll keep away as best we can."

"They do say the wise court not danger," Margit agreed.

"You do that. If you ever see a group with matching tattoos or bandanas, stay on your toes."

I intended to take the warning to heart, but I did find it a little funny that these groups were basically color gangs. The authorities had cracked down on those by the time I'd gotten into secondary schooling, and it was a curious twist of fate that I'd be experiencing a similar thing a lifetime later.

Boy, is the world dangerous... Now it's starting to feel like an adventure.

"Well, just make sure not to stand out too much, yeah? Making a name for yourself is good and all, but these kindsa scumbags are always looking for wide-eyed kids to screw over."

Chewing on a mouthful of bread, I thought back to yesterday. I'd forgotten all about this amidst the commotion, but Mister Hansel, the bald adventurer we'd met at the gate, had also pointed me in someone else's direction. Was this "Fidelio" another unscrupulous clan hustler?

Seeing as I had two knowledgeable adventurers already willing to explain things, I asked Ebbo and Kevin if they knew the name; their reaction was one of genuine surprise.

"Fidelio of the Snoozing Kitten? You mean Saint Fidelio?"

...Oh? Saint? Now that's a bit too coincidental to be a fluke.

"He's famous around these parts as a wandering priest and an adventurer. I think he got his start, uh...running a confessional?"

"The hell, man? C'mon. I'm pretty sure he was a holy knight."

As it turned out, this Fidelio was indeed *the* Fidelio whose legend we'd heard on our way here. I mean, he was a saint *and* a lay priest—there was no mistaking him. Though admittedly, there was a lot of wiggle room between the kind of priest who listened to his adherents' sins and preached absolution and the kind who professed his faith through hoofsteps and spears.

All my information came secondhand from Miss Celia, but when I'd asked her about religious hierarchies, she'd explained that there were two broad types of clergy.

The first was the monastic priest: this referred to those who lived in cloisters and exclusively dedicated their days to worship. When most people thought of priests, this was the image that came to mind. They offered salvation to the masses in the name of their god, and their foremost priority was to teach their ways to all who wished to learn them.

On the other hand, lay priests forewent home and shelter to travel the lands with nothing but their chosen deity's blessing. Sometimes derided as "castaways" by society at large, they lived in service of faith without staying in any one place for too long.

These lay priests might reject churches to uphold their gods in idiosyncratic ways, but make no mistake—they were not self-identified by any means. They

still had to be accepted by their divine master; it was only that they felt the rules and restrictions that came with organization impeded their love of their god.

Some packed their things to proselytize in faraway lands, while others went around local towns teaching anyone who would listen. Others still left their sheltered temples behind to fulfill a mandate of slaying the apostates who spat in the face of their religion. The reasons a priest might forsake their monastery spanned a kaleidoscopic spectrum, and their only unifying trait was their vagrancy.

Yet that wasn't to say monastic and lay priests were at odds with one another. Some of the former group would posit that true faith could only be attained by cutting off from the outside world, and some from the latter would insist righteous teachings were only righteous when brought into reality, but they represented the minority.

But tangents aside, it was just my luck to make a connection to someone so incredible right off the bat. The saga we'd heard hadn't mentioned it, but apparently he was a sapphire-ranked adventurer. He was at the third tier from the top—or second from the top, if you ignored the honorary violet title. With that kind of background, I doubted his epic accolades were fabricated.

"Wait, what kinda priest was he again?"

"Like, what god? Beats me. I just know it's not the God of Trials or the Night Goddess."

"In the poem," I piped up, "it said he worships the Sun God."

"Huh? Hrm, if you say so."

The pair didn't seem too well-informed on Fidelio even though he was one of their rivals in the business. Or perhaps it was just that the saint outclassed them to such a degree that they weren't competing for the same kinds of work.

In fairness, it was a staple of storytelling to alter a hero's faith. Poets loved to tweak details, and it wasn't like the minstrels who performed the works all had perfect memories. I'd have to meet the man in person if I wanted to find out the truth.

“Anyway, I haven’t ever heard a bad word about the guy—in fact, he sounds like a genuinely good person. He’ll go around taking cheap jobs if he thinks they need doing, and the crazy bastard can’t be stopped if word of injustice gets to him.”

“Doesn’t have a clan, either. He leads a party, but since none of them deal with any of the clans, they don’t really factor into the power balance around town. Er, well, the folks on the street really love ’em, so I hear you can’t even get into the marketplace if you piss ’em off. Guess they’re pretty big in that regard.”

“Yeah. Speaking of... No matter what you do, you do *not* wanna piss Fidelio off.”

That the man didn’t assert himself into politics but was still not to be trifled with was, to me, the epitome of a badass. I asked if there were any stories of what happened when people crossed him, and was met with the kind of tale that wouldn’t make it into poetry.

Legend had it that on the night of righteous ruin, Fidelio cut down one hundred wicked men.

Around the time he had begun to make a name for himself, a shady clan tried to meddle in his affairs. Whether they’d attempted to leech off his profits or take him under their wing was uncertain, but they’d offered him some deal that had greatly offended him. When he refused, they’d broken into his go-to tavern to kidnap and defile the owner’s daughter.

Furious, Fidelio summoned his partymates and led them on a raid on the villains’ base. He marched in through the front door with nothing but a shield and spear in hand.

By the end of the night, he had made an example of every single one of the clan’s members, destroying their reputation so thoroughly that they fizzled out of existence.

What a heroic tale.

Above all else, it ended in the coolest way possible. After annihilating the corrupt, he then marched to the castle, slammed a sack full of gold coins at the

foot of the gate, and shouted, “If you must take my private battles to be a crime, then so be it! But know that it was I who relieved you from the guilt of your criminal negligence! Offer a prayer to God that my service comes with this tip!”

How cool could he be? He’d gone to pay his fines up-front because he’d known unauthorized combat would elicit punishment.

At the end of it all, he’d taken the ravaged girl as his wife; to this day, he cherished her dearly, as well as the tavern he’d come to settle down in.

“He’s... He’s *so* cool.”

Oh my *gods*, was this right up my alley. The last vestiges of drunkenness vanished as the excitement of the story took over.

“You never do get tired of stories like this, do you Erich?” Margit said with a sigh.

“Oh, come on! There isn’t a man alive who wouldn’t like this one. Right?”

I turned to the other two and they agreed with me. Maybe men’s heartstrings were just built to be pulled by tales like these.

“Well, you two are free to go see him, but keep your guard up.”

“Yup. You can never know if someone’s *really* a good guy in this line of work.”

Their slapdash warnings tacked to the end went in one ear and out the other; our plans for the evening were set.

[Tips] Many clans dabble in wrongdoing at levels that won’t force the government to intervene. While most pay small bribes to have minor crimes overlooked, some delicately tiptoe around felonies that would ordinarily be punishable by death.

The discomfort of rain drumming on my hood soaked in.

I’d almost put up a barrier like I always did, but then had an epiphany. It would be strange if my mantle was dry and my boots were free of mud.

“It’s so slippery,” I said.

“Honestly. All this cobblestone means so little with how much mud there is. Are you sure you won’t fall with only two legs?”

Marsheim’s streets were dilapidated. Not only were there gaps in the stone pavement, but no one bothered to clean off the dirt brought in on travelers’ shoes—a serious concern due to the rain. Margit was less than pleased to navigate this slipping hazard with a hangover, but she still managed to expertly scurry about; I, on the other hand, had a real challenge in keeping my balance without the extra limbs.

Ugh, it really would be strange if we show up somewhere else completely clean. I unfortunately couldn’t just go around meticulously separating mud and water so it’d only touch my clothes without affecting my body. But at the same time, I didn’t want the cold to numb my fingers in the event of an emergency; it was a choice between conserving my mana and staying ready for action at a moment’s notice.

“Well,” I said, “I have a trick for keeping my footing.”

That said, my stability was too important to skimp out on. It was a simple solution: I placed Unseen Hands right where I’d step so I didn’t have to make contact with the ground. This was the same old tactic that let me jump around mid-air. For how simple it was, the thought of guaranteeing solid ground beneath me was a godly power as a swordsman. This had certainly been one of my smartest ideas, if I do say so myself.

“And what a trick it is,” Margit marveled quietly. “You’re making me jealous.”

I offered to do the same for her, but she said that they felt gross to step on and turned me down. Not being able to directly feel the ground was viscerally unpleasant to her, both as a huntress and as an arachne.

I could sympathize. I’d feel just as uncomfortable if I had a lousy sword at my hip throwing me off center; there were probably lots of instinctive maladies that came with expertise and physiology that others just wouldn’t understand.

“But I must say... Perhaps we should consider our work carefully on rainy days.”

“Looks like it. I’d like to just laze around at an inn unless we absolutely have to go out.”

Even with the sun hanging high behind the clouds, few people could be seen on the streets. The thought of diligently working through poor weather didn’t occur to anyone around here.

Barring the agricultural sector, the idea that a worker was to do their job through hell or high water had been a very modern concept on Earth. In an era like this one, angry clouds were reason enough to put business on pause for a day.

It was just plain inefficient—not to mention *dangerous*. Without the luxury of rubber-soled boots, physical labor was a safety hazard. Almost everyone was cooped up indoors working on side jobs unless they had serious extenuating circumstances to force them outdoors.

As for us, we were sloshing through the mud to find an inn.

As hearty a welcome as we’d received at the Inky Squid, it wouldn’t exactly make for the most pleasant place to stay long-term. The establishment was an ultra-cheap motel with rooms as cheap as five assarii a night, and while Miss Laurentius had ensured we’d gotten a good room that was barely passable, we were *not* renting it out.

I’d lived a life and a half in what I considered relatively well-off conditions, and what I’d witnessed in that room was an affront to my hygienic code. I refuse to elaborate—just thinking back to it makes my skin crawl. By my standards, a massive commons that cost a libra and thirty-five assarii a *month* was no way for a person to live. I would not under any circumstances welcome lice, bedbugs, and especially roaches as roommates.

While I could admit that perhaps I’d just grown up in an overly sanitary environment, I simply didn’t understand how others could bear to live like that. Trekking through a muddy forest or smelly sewer for work was one thing, but in my everyday life? Please.

Margit and I had only needed to exchange a single glance to agree that our environment would have tremendous impact on our quality of life. We’d turned down the Inky Squid’s offer in an instant.

We'd made our way to what the locals called Hovel Street. It was a terribly windy path on account of it running along the city walls, and it shrank and widened with no regard for the pedestrians who might walk on it. Not even the name was planned: apparently, the dwellers here had started it calling it one day and it stuck. The palpable laissez-faire attitude coming from the government was very apt for a borderland town.

For better or for worse, the capital had itself put together to become what I would categorize as a lightly sterilized fantasy city. But the frontier was something else: rough-and-tumble fantasy settings pushed all the right buttons for me. Even when it came to TV, I'd been a fan of the grungy stuff where infighting and betrayal took up most of the screen time and dragons didn't feel all too strong.

Looking back, I'd never gotten to see the ending to that story. A shame, really—the wick on my candle of life had run out before I could finish my favorite books and movies. For one short moment, I almost felt like I could understand Lady Agrippina's fixation on unearthing all the world's stories before they vanished.

Well, in her case, finding all the stories wouldn't even be the end of it: she'd still run into a wall if an author died or simply gave up on writing. Waiting was a tremendous ordeal when it was the only choice available, and no amount of money could bring back a dead poet.

On the off chance she developed inter-planar farsight to peer into alternate universes where the author was still alive, that still left the issue of motivation. Not even she was broken enough to solve that.

I digress—shaking off the emotional toll of inconvenient circumstance, I finally found myself before our destination.

Despite the pelting rain, the tavern was noticeably fancier than those in the vicinity. It boasted a roof free of broken shingles, and while its windows didn't have glass, they were closed up with properly matching boards. Old cobblestones peeked out from beneath the mud: whoever was in charge had taken the time to clean the steps outside their front door.

Up above was a sign that read "The Snoozing Kitten" in fanciful lettering,

accompanied by a curled up cat carved into the wood itself.

Here we were, at the inn Mr. Hansel had recommended—and perhaps at the home of a real hero.

Part of why we'd set off from the Inky Squid was its quality, but to come clean, the bigger reason was that I'd let my frivolous desire to see an epic hero in the flesh take hold. Could you blame me? I'd never gotten a chance like this in Berylin. This was no different than hearing that your favorite author visited a local cafe and suddenly getting the urge to go.

Yet I also couldn't deny that seeing the place made me hesitant.

"The business seems rather well put together," Margit said.

"It does," I echoed. "It does, but..."

"But it doesn't seem like it would cater to adventurers."

Both of us had reached the same conclusion. As nice as a well-maintained exterior was, it clashed with the image of an adventurer-focused lodge where property damage was part of the cost of doing business.

To begin with, I'd had my suspicions ever since our talk with the ladies at the front desk, where the inn's name hadn't come up. If this was a famous adventurer's main headquarters, then one would think every kid signing up would come straight here and crowd up the place.

This is just a normal inn for merchants and travelers.

"Still, we won't learn anything by standing outside. Shall we?"

"Yeah, let's."

After I'd fallen silent for a moment, the hand I'd been holding all this time suddenly jerked me forward. Letting one doubtful thought stop me in my tracks was a bad habit of mine, and I was grateful to have someone to put my mind back on the rails before I could freeze up for any length of time.

Shaking the rain off my mantle and calming my pounding heart, I pushed the door open.

My entrance was met with a cute bell chime. The sight that followed had me

stunned—my best description was that I'd walked into a fashionable cafe.

It was a long, narrow space with about a third of the room reserved for a giant wooden counter; a mere eight seats lined its length. Other than that, five square tables that seated four each were lined up parallel with the bar. The place clearly didn't have a high capacity.

Every square inch of the countertop had been polished, and I couldn't spot a speck of dust on the walls. None of the furniture was broken or wobbled, and looking past the bar stools to the liquor cabinet on the far side, I noticed that the bottles had even been neatly sorted.

But what drew the eye most of all was the three hanging lights on the ceiling. They radiated a mystic incandescence only found in the biggest shops of bustling cities, and it was only midday. The warm glow of just one of these trinkets could trade for a fully built house out here in Ende Erde.

My expectations had been off the mark in more ways than one. The vulgar pub full of adventurers I'd imagined vaporized in my mind, replaced with images of a cafe off a small road that turned into a speakeasy come sundown.

I thought to myself that it would have been the perfect spot to enjoy a cigarette and paperback, completed with an order of coffee. Of course, all three of those were fanciful luxuries that cost a fortune each to procure here.

"Why, hello—welcome. I haven't seen you two before."

Before I could finish soaking in my surprise, a woman came out from the back of the store and called out to us. She wore a standard waitress uniform of an apron and a triangular bandana, but her equally triangular ears, peach-pink nose, and velvety black coat were markedly feline: she was a bubastisian.

Bubastisians were immigrants to both the Empire and the Central Continent as a whole, having spread out from the same southwestern continent as their distant animal cousins. Their frames were close to mensch, but with a healthy dose of feline litheness mixed in; their heads, meanwhile, were big cat heads with a bit more of a human touch.

"Hang your cloaks up on the wall for me, if you'd please. The air flow is good around there, so they'll dry right up."

While she didn't end her sentences in a hackneyed "nya," the construction of her mouth made her roll up the beginnings and ends of her words in a way that struck me as very cat-like. Her palms had pronounced paw pads, and she pointed toward the wall with a clawless—or, at least, sheathed—finger, and we obliged by hanging up our outerwear and taking a seat at the counter.

"This isn't exactly a typical hour for customers, so don't expect perfect catering. Is breakfast food okay? Imperial or royal style? Oh, we can do nomadic eastern dishes too."

"Oh, um, I'm all right. I've eaten breakfast, so may I just have some tea?"

"I'd very much appreciate something light to nibble on."

I only asked for tea because I felt awkward coming into a tavern without ordering anything, but Margit ended up getting food. She hadn't been able to eat much this morning; last night's leftovers had proven too heavy for her.

"A cup of tea will be three assarii, and... Oh, excuse me, Miss. Do you have a hangover? I have just the thing for that."

The feline waitress hurried off—curiously, while her body language epitomized the word "pitter-patter," she didn't make a sound—and into the kitchen. Flames were much more hazardous to deal with here than on modern Earth, and even the best chefs couldn't afford to do their work near a wooden countertop like this.

"I quite like the atmosphere," Margit said.

"It's nice," I agreed. "Calm and homely."

We were the only patrons at this hour, so we looked around the quiet eatery and leisurely chatted away. The surprising interior had made me completely forget about my original goal of finding Fidelio.

"You know, I think I may like this sort of ambience. I've never been to a place like this—neither at home nor in the Old Town."

"I saw one tavern kind of like it in the capital. If I recall, the owner was from the northern isles, and so were most of their customers. They had a lot of different beers, I remember."

“Is beer the drink of choice for northern peoples, then?”

Our conversation went off on a tangent about the tinge of foreign charm we felt around us and went on until the waitress came back. She had two mugs and a small plate in hand.

“Sorry for the wait. Here’s yours, Mister.”

The woman handed me a plain yet fragrant cup of red tea. Pretty much every imperial citizen had a variant of this a few times a day, and I could tell from the color and smell that this was dandelion-based as opposed to chicory.

“And for you, Miss.”

Meanwhile, Margit was given a drink I’d never seen before. The creamy white made it seem like heated milk, but there was an unfamiliar tartness cutting through the soft and sweet scent.

“Mm...” Margit took a moment and asked, “Ginger and honey?”

“That’s right! This is just the thing to get the spirit of liquor to pack its things. My husband swears by it.”

That was a nice tidbit of information. I rarely ever got hungover, but I’d make a mental note in case I ever got a bunch of trashy booze thrust upon me. Honey was a touch expensive, but it could always be repurposed as a calorie-dense travel food, and ginger was easy to come by. *Maybe we should keep some on hand going forward.*

“And fish?” Margit said.

“Mhm, pickled river fish with a side of pickled ginger. It’s *reaaally* sour, but one bite will blow any drunkenness away. My husband swears by this one, too.”

Tiny little fish lined the plate alongside slices of ginger. It certainly wasn’t for everyone, but I could definitely see it working wonders for someone slogging through an alcoholic stupor. The brine had eliminated the characteristically pungent odor of freshwater fish, and I was tempted to ask for a plate myself.

Wait, “husband”? If the stories are true, then—

“Shymar, you forgot the lemon.” Suddenly, a man’s voice rang out from the kitchen. The light sound of footsteps drew closer until he slid into the light of

the main room. “I’m always telling you this is what pulls everything together, remember?”

“Oh, I’m sorry darling. I just can’t help but end up leaving it out. It’s a nightmare if any of the juices splash on my nose while I’m squeezing it.”

There was nothing remarkable about his dress: cotton undershirt, hemp pants, and a canvas apron used to the point of fringing. He typified the average innkeeper.

Further, he was a normal mensch, through and through. His features were a tad undefined for a Rhinian, with shallow-set eyes and a nose that wasn’t quite high. His gentle green eyes drooped lightly and paired well with the untamed curls of his almost-reddish chestnut hair. Put together, his features inspired relaxation in those who looked at him.

My snap impression was that of a genial man running a tavern...but one look with a trained eye was enough to spot the truth.

Everything from his posture to his gaze; from the contour of his build, hidden beneath his clothes, to the calluses on his hand as he held up the plate of sliced lemon; every little thing spoke to an unwavering strength that seeped from his every pore.

His meaty shoulders spoke to a spear swung sideways, and perhaps a shield readied for the occasional thrust. The tree trunks he called legs conjured the vivid image of him marching alongside cavalry. His body was living armor—not the kind worn in the name of ceremony, but the kind forged in the fires of necessity. Although clerical garb would certainly have suited his face alone, the overwhelming might radiating off the rest of him created a totally different air.

Perhaps most striking of all was that, no matter how humbly he dressed, the virtue he carried himself with was palpable. I saw now why the Father God had blessed him with the privilege of His miracles.



And so too did I see that the legends had not been romanticized or exaggerated, but were the unequivocal truth.

This guy is ridiculously *strong.* Behind his calm demeanor was an absolute alertness; vitality bubbled forth from his entire being to the point where I couldn't imagine a world in which he might fall.

I'd risen to my feet before I knew it.

"Pardon me. May I take it that you and Saint Fidelio are one and the same?"

No, it wasn't that I'd simply stood up; I bowed in the face of this legendary adventurer the people worshiped as their saint. Glancing over, I noticed that Margit had come to the same conclusions as me and stepped off her stool to offer a curtsy. Even the slightest bit of martial experience was enough to realize the man's strength. Anyone who couldn't was blind or a fool—quite possibly both.

"Aw, shucks." Yet our show of reverence only made the man scratch his cheek and put on a weak, awkward smile. "I'm not so great that you need to bow like that. Besides, this place isn't really an adventuring sort of business anyway. Here, why don't we all relax and take a seat?"

Although the saint was used to dealing with his grandiose reputation, he didn't seem to like it. In a departure from the brutal legends of his deeds, the man beckoned us over with a tender smile.

[Tips] Bubastisians are a demihuman race who can trace their origins to the Southwestern Continent, known best for their feline heads and coats, as well as their limber, flexible bodies. Highly adaptable, they are known to grow and shed fur as needed to adjust to local climates. They spread out from their initial homelands thousands of years ago, and have settled down in various spots around the world.

Though the prevailing bubastisian stereotype trends capricious and aloof, as individuals they vary greatly, as with any group of people. They can be surprisingly loving at times, and some can even be described as being quick to emotion.

“I usually don’t come out until evening, you see.” Saint Fidelio sat down on the other side of a four-person table as he made his disclaimer. “But it doesn’t look like we’ll have much daytime business with the rain, so... Anyway, let me introduce myself properly. My name is Fidelio—Fidelio of Eilia, an adventurer and lay priest of Sun.”

His simple introduction consisted of a name and birthplace, suggesting that he didn’t come from a privileged background. He then took a beat to sip on the cup of tea he’d been served.

“By no means am I worthy of being called a saint.”

These words were no mere modesty. Rather, they came from an unshakeable pride...and a strong sense of self-admonishment.

“My rank as an adventurer is sapphire-blue. This also feels like more than I’m due, but it does mean I’ve walked further along the same path that you two are on.”

As expected of a man whose rivals warned never to anger and whose admirers wrote sagas about, he was ranked third from the top—second in practical terms. The man was a bona fide hero.

Adventuring ranks were more a gauge of trustworthiness than strength. While the lower tiers only represented a passing connection with the Association, the upper ones were outright assertions on the reliability of one’s character. A sapphire adventurer could likely go anywhere in the local region, country, or even abroad. It probably even matched up to the ring I’d gotten from Lady Agrippina.

All this to say, the man wasn’t just strong: he’d earned respect among his community.

Another note was that humility in the Empire was not considered a virtue except in the presence of social superiors; that he’d played down his own fame spoke volumes. Perhaps that was why the Association trusted him so deeply despite lacking the luggage of a clan. They didn’t want anyone throwing their weight around and ruining their public image.

“And this tavern isn’t suited for adventurers. I happen to have a long

relationship with the owner—”

“He’s my husband, after all.”

“Well... Anyway, I only get to stay here because of my personal connections. We usually only serve travelers and merchants.”

A PDA-infused comment came flying in out of nowhere. It seemed that in spite of the tragic past between these two, their marriage hadn’t been one spurred on by guilt or responsibility; the depth of their love was self-evident.

“Most of the time,” he went on, clearing his throat, “we ask that adventurers find another place to stay...but considering how you know my name, I assume you were sent my way by someone, weren’t you?”

I told him of our meeting with the bald adventurer we’d met at the gate. Upon hearing Mister Hansel’s name, the priest scratched his curly hair with a defeated sigh.

“He’s a friend of mine. We aren’t officially a fixed party, but we do work together often enough...and he has a bad habit of sending young adventurers my way as soon as he takes a liking to them.”

“Oh, you shouldn’t badmouth a friend who trusts you like he does. Honestly, he should stop by for drinks more often.”

“In his case, it’s less about trust and more about curiosity. And it’s better that he stays away: I don’t want him guzzling down all of our good liquor. All he cares about is volume, and he *still* took my Arman and—”

“And drank it with ice—I know, I know. I’ve heard that story a hundred times, darling.”

Despite his grumbling, the hero’s words were overflowing with fondness. If I recalled, Armans were one of the most premier apple brandies, famed as a sipping drink for its impeccable fragrance when lightly warmed. For someone to toss in ice and chug it down was a crime worth a hundred complaints. In fact, anyone but a best friend could expect to be met with blades—especially when both parties were adventurers.

“Looking at you two...” He cleared his throat again and looked us over. “You

might be beginner *adventurers*, but I can tell you're experienced *otherwise.*"

Just as we'd seen him for the powerhouse he was, one glance was all he needed to tell we hadn't been born yesterday.

Right he was: at the very least, I was confident I had laid enough groundwork to proudly proclaim myself a Lvl 1 Fighter. Both of us had the basics under our belts, and I was glad we weren't being taken for amateurs. But going by the standards of a world built by a put-up-job-hating sword, all the daily training up until one came of age was the minimum to get to the start line—I was best off considering myself a Lvl 1 character.

"I spent some time training with my canton watch, and a little more playing bodyguard."

"And I trained as a huntsman in the same canton. Spending my days amongst boar and deer has left me with some familiarity with bows and knives."

In the presence of a living legend, we were babes fresh out the womb. Unlike our host, we shared our backgrounds with due humility. It struck me as odd that he tilted his head at our statements, but I thought we were being perfectly reasonable.

"Hrm... Then I guess what he wants isn't for me to train you, but to just teach you the ABCs of adventuring. Neither of you seem to use a weapon I could teach anyway."

Oh, that sounds great. Miss Laurentius had, by way of Ebbo and Kevin, taught us about clans and turf, but we hadn't gotten anything about actual work. I'd known all along that Mister Hansel hadn't referred us purely out of the goodness of his heart, but by the looks of it, all he wanted was for us to climb the ranks quickly so he could toss us some kind of job. I was all for it if it meant we were going to benefit—especially if it meant studying under an expert who could tell our weapons of choice by sight alone.

"But he sure does have a knack for awkward timing," Mister Fidelio went on. "We've finally gotten my last group of students to set off on their own, so..."

"Oh, what are you talking about?" Miss Shymar said. "I know you liked having them around."

“Not at all. Your father always looks grumpier when we have adventurers in the house.”

“My dad is my dad. Or what? Are you trying to say that you feel everything the same way he does?”

“Well, no, but...”

As the man trailed off, his wife came out from behind the counter with a fresh tray of tea to cut off his train of thought.

“Don’t pretend you didn’t care about them, darling. I liked them too—those four were the sweetest kids.”

“But they had a habit of getting full of themselves, and quickly, too.”

“Hee hee, but I happen to remember a certain someone giving long, passionate sermons about faith to a priest who wasn’t even part of his sect. And I’ll have you know I loved having the little mage around to help with chores. All our laundry, done like poof!”

The missus of the inn giggled at her husband as if she were watching a small child mull something over. Then she poured us another serving of tea each, raised one finger, and addressed us.

“Excuse me, you two. Would you happen to be any good around the house?”

Margit and I looked at each other: the answer was yes. I’d served as the servant of a lazy master who’d forced every manner of household chore on me; I didn’t need to ask to tell that Margit had undergone bridal lessons alongside her training as a hunter—when it came to needlework, she was several levels above me.

“Like this big oaf said, we were looking after a party of adventurers until last winter. They were four young kids, and one of them was even a mage! I really appreciated having the extra help around.”

She took a seat by her husband with catlike grace, not letting out a sound. Naturally pointed upward to about the tip of her head, her tail swayed happily behind her; every so often, it playfully grazed against Mister Fidelio’s neck. He didn’t budge, but I could tell he was fighting the ticklishness, and it revived

memories of my parents' pet cat back on Earth.

"Come on, darling. Why don't we let them stay?"

"But Shymar—"

"It's not like this is the first time we'll be housing students of yours. Besides, you're already set on looking after them, aren't you?"

"I haven't necessarily decided yet. I have my own work to do, and I have that long trip planned for the summer, remember?"

"That's all the more reason. Are you really going to make me and my dad run the inn all by ourselves with his bad knee?" Miss Shymar stressed the last point, and her mister sat silent in response. "Besides, no matter what you say now, I *know* you're going to end up taking care of them eventually. Don't think I don't remember how you turned the last batch away, just to let them walk all over you after a few more pleas. I mean, you even let them drag you out on an adventure with them!"

An adventure with an epic hero?! That's so unfair... I wonder if I can get a personal lesson too.

"If you can promise to work your very hardest in the mornings and evenings," the woman said to us, "I'll cut down the cost of a room from fifteen to five assarii. You'll stay with us, won't you? I know it must be hard with only the two of you."

"Oh, Shymar... You're always like this. You don't have to take in every stray that turns up on your doorstep, you know?"

Mister Fidelio's furrowed brow betrayed genuine concern, but Miss Shymar just laughed at him.

"But isn't that why you're here now?"

Unable to overcome his wife's strong will and mischievous teasing, the man could do nothing but sigh in response.

[Tips] The Snoozing Kitten is an inn for layperson travelers run by a father-and-daughter pair of bubastisians. Though once known as the headquarters of

Fidelio the Saint, the man himself solemnly warned those in the know not to spread that knowledge in the wake of a certain incident. Nowadays, his connection to the establishment is no longer a public topic.

Although the business is said to be incredibly welcoming, most adventurers and mercenaries are turned away at the door.

The room we were shown to as our new home was a simple but comfy two-bedroom chamber. Both beds were spacious enough to accommodate larger races, and while the mattresses weren't quite fancy enough to have springs, they were thick and pleasant to lay on.

Although the sheets were faded, that was proof of regular washing, and they faintly carried the pleasant scent of soap. The pillows were plump, and they didn't look like they'd flatten instantly upon being used; they must have been stuffed with some kind of down. The thin summer blankets felt fresh too: maybe they hung them out on sunny days, because they were nice and dry without the slightest hint of moldy stink.

If this was ordinarily fifteen assarii, then it was a steal. A room like this would've cost half a libra in the capital.

They also offered two lockable chests and a wardrobe—though we were the ones who had to haul them in—for long-term guests, and I could even borrow a table and candle stand. The candles themselves would obviously come out of my own pocket, but I was just glad to have a way of dealing with paperwork if the need arose.

"On the days you help me run the place, you'll get a meal each in the morning and evening. Oh, but I guess I can treat you to lunch too if you do a good job. Otherwise, you can buy a meal for four assarii—but it'll be whatever we're making. If you want something specific, you'll have to ask about it then and there."

The missus—she told us to call her that—showed us around the Snoozing Kitten and explained how things worked. The building was a rectangular U-shape, with a small laundry station, steam bath, and manual-flush toilet in the inner courtyard.

In total, there were sixteen rooms across three floors. None of them were commons: they only had private spaces for parties of two-to-six. I thought it was a fairly bullish business strategy, but the missus explained that half the rooms were constantly full; counting the long-term rentals, they never dipped below two-thirds of capacity. Spring and fall regularly saw them booked out, and the busy travel seasons even saw groups of three or four lay sleeping bags on the floor of two-person bedrooms.

"In the busiest season we ever had, our guests had to start pitching tents in the courtyard! But, well, that got in the way of laundry, so I don't think we'll do it again unless the situation is just dire."

Considering how clean and well-kept the rooms were, I thought the popularity was deserved. For those who stayed semi-permanently, they had a separate mess hall from the bar at the front; we were directed toward that for future meals. When I asked why they'd bothered dividing the food services into a cafeteria and pub, the missus laughed and answered that it was just personal preference.

Preference, huh? Funnily enough, I felt like that was a better reason than any other she could've given.

We were then shown into the missus's pride and joy: the kitchen. It lived up to expectations and was decked out with all sorts of equipment. They had an iron bread-baking oven like the ones found in specialized bakeries; all three of the stovetops were built for large-scale cooking. On top of that, they had three smaller stoves too, perfect for fine-tuning smaller portions.

The kitchen was free to use for motel-style guests who only paid for lodging, though firewood naturally had to be supplied oneself. The facilities were well maintained, and I imagined that some guests must have chosen the inn solely for access to its cooking ranges.

The island enshrined in the middle of the kitchen, incredibly, had a polished iron top. The flat surface looked to be perfect for laying out a huge helping of ingredients. What was more, a closer look unveiled the crest of the Hearth Goddess—protector of homes and arbiter of household chores—etched into the metal. Sure to never rust or stain, the table would have made any

housewife go green with envy.

“What do you think? It’s a nice place, isn’t it? My old man put a lot of work building this place from the—”

As the missus proudly wrapped up her tour, an unfamiliar tongue overlapped with her final statement. Unable to catch what had been said, I turned to see an older bubastisian with a cane looking our way.

Owing to his age, his black coat was starting to gray; yet his face was still sharp and evocative of big cat species. Though he was starting to lose mass, he remained a big man and easily filled out a neatly tailored set of clothes: his pants were quality cotton, his undershirt was free of wrinkles, and his apron was dyed an even black. A ledger hung from the apron via a metal hook, confirming that he was the owner of the Snoozing Kitten—which also meant he was the missus’s father and Mister Fidelio’s father-in-law.

His features were solemn for a feline, giving off the impression of an honest merchant—but they also gave off the kind of idiosyncratic confidence a man would need to separate his restaurant and bar for no reason but his own preference.

He spoke the words of a different land—no, just of a different *people*, all without dropping the bit of straw in his mouth. In turn, his daughter replied in the same language.

Bluntly put, it sounded like they were meowing at each other, but with a noticeable human cadence. As a Rhinian and perhaps more importantly, as a mensch, I had a tremendously difficult time parsing anything. I couldn’t so much as glean from their tone whether the conversation was peaceful small talk or an impassioned argument.

I supposed I’d just have to accept that there was too big a gap in how our ears were structured. Although most of the sentient races had similarly shaped ears on the outside, that didn’t necessarily hold true on the inside; that was even more true of vocal cords. Bubastisians spoke a language—technically many languages that changed according to region—that included sounds that simply didn’t track well with my ears.

Then again, maybe I ought to be glad I could hear anything at all. Aquatic

peoples and some rabbit-based demihumans had no vocal cords to begin with, meaning they didn't even try to engage in verbal communication.

I'd already tried and failed to learn catspeak a lifetime ago. Adding a "meow" to the ends of my sentences wasn't quite going to be enough.

I quietly watched over the pair's indecipherable conversation until it came to a close and the man shifted his forceful gaze toward us. His golden eyes glowed dimly, looking down on us with palpable discernment.

"Pleased to meet you, sir," I said. "I'm grateful to have the opportunity to stay here. My name is Erich of Konigstuhl."

"And I am Margit, also of Konigstuhl. I'm most pleased to make your acquaintance."

Whatever their conversation entailed, we decided to introduce ourselves. First impressions start from there, after all.

The innkeeper twirled the straw in his mouth a few times and stared at us with a scrunched-up face. Eventually, I felt the unusual sensation of a giant paw on my head, and he said, "Cut corners and I'll shoo ya out," before quickly walking off.

So...does this mean we passed?

"That's my dad, Adham. As you can see, he's a grumpy old man, but I promise he's nice. Look past his mean side for me, won't you?"

After giggling at our confusion, the missus rolled up her sleeves and put some pep into her step. Just as she did, her husband came in from the yard with a giant wooden box in hand—a box that was full of vegetables.

The crate was so big that I doubted I could wrap my arms all the way around it, and it was completely stuffed with carrots. Yet in spite of the obvious weight, Mister Fidelio hoisted it around like a small packet of letters.

"All right, you two," the hero said. "We'll get to talking about adventure, but before that, there's work to do."

If this was the price an adventurer had to pay in order to learn from those who had come before, then our first quest was set: we were going to peel some

vegetables.

[Tips] Motels are simple inns that provide only rooms and few other active services. Catering to the common traveler, they tend to have public kitchens for guests to prepare their own meals in. However, it is far from uncommon for locations like these to serve food on account of being hybrid businesses that are part-motel and part-inn.

Peel. Then peel some more. Peel with the whole of your body and mind.

My time helping the caravan chef this past spring had left me more than used to this. The trick was to get a good angle of entry to start, and then to keep the blade peeling all the way through. That way, I could coil across to pull off the outer layer like the carrot had been built to come apart like this all along.

That said, it was amazing to see a blue-level adventurer hunched over a crate of vegetables with a kitchen knife like this.

“While you’re new,” Mister Fidelio said suddenly as he tossed a smoothly peeled carrot into a basket, “your ‘work’ will just be a bunch of odd jobs. You’ll fix some broken shingles, look for somebody’s lost pet, or clean out the gutters. And you’ll carry stuff—there’s a lot of carrying. The weirder requests will be things like snooping to see if somebody’s spouse is cheating, or following up on an unpaid bar tab.”

“I’d figured as much,” I said, “but that sure is dull.”

That said, it wasn’t like I’d signed up with nothing but sagas in my mind; being told the truth wasn’t enough to deter me. Hearing this straight from a reliable source also helped to further knock down my expectations so that my future experiences wouldn’t come as a shock.

Hey, wait. This carrot has a rotten spot. I guess I’ll have to bore that out so we can salvage the rest of it.

“Villains like the ones that show up in songs are hard to come by,” our teacher explained. “Obviously, monsters don’t run wild near cities often, and the authorities wouldn’t let anything dangerous settle down in their own

backyard. You won't ever see a mystic beast run rampant in a forest within walking distance from the city, for example."

"Because anything that threatens public safety will be dealt with right away?"

"That's right. People wouldn't be able to live if picking herbs for supper came with that kind of danger."

Monsters popping up as soon as one left city limits was a convenient contrivance thought up for games; this world was much realer, in both the good sense and the boring sense. If economic webs were under constant peril, society would never have been built in the first place.

No bandits camped near cities; no monsters flowed endlessly forth from some well-known nest; no cantons were at constant risk of imminent eradication. In the event that such dangers *did* crop up, the lord would surely be forced to use his knights to resolve the matter. Letting business stop, even for a day, could have wide-reaching ramifications—particularly in this remote region that saw high international traffic. Poor performance could throw dirt on the whole Empire's image.

An adventurer's place was to do the work that was just a few touches too tedious for the client to do themselves, all for the price of a few coins. We were just chosen over random day-laborers off the street because we had a sizable organization willing to vouch for us at the bare minimum level.

...With that in mind, the thought of a whole canton being left to fend for itself against a limbless drake was even more staggering. What kind of absolute buffoon had been running that place? Surely, the magistrate must've gotten his position through nepotism. I could only imagine how hard life had been for the poor people living under him.

Looking back, I was thankful that my beloved Konigstuhl had been run by a competent magistrate. He hadn't been the friendliest person, but at least he'd been loyal to his duties.

"Once you reach ruby-red, you'll have more opportunities to leave town. Your quests will include delivering letters or verbal messages to nearby cantons, or to fill up slots in an escort formation."

“What about bandit hunting?” I asked. “I’ve heard there are a lot of them in the area.”

“Mm... That might be a bit of a stretch.”

Apparently, the raiders around these parts were foxy enough not to have any fixed territory worth noting. Most were like the rest of the highwaymen I’d encountered thus far: regular folks who didn’t shy away from making a quick, illicit profit. Leaders of marauder and strongman groups in the region deliberately obscured their activity, with the worst of them going so far as to operate whole *caravans* as cover for their wrongdoing; the ghastliest tale of such tactics saw an entire canton wiped out without any chance to retaliate.

The depths of their knavery nearly drew a growl out of me. I knew they were putting a lot of thought into evading strong adventurers and imperial patrolmen, but the thought that such groups were still out there now made me sick to my stomach.

“That’s why only the most boneheaded groups have related Association quests in the first place. Any crook who survives a single season out here will learn not to stay in one place.”

Yet in exchange, the government always bought bandit heads at a premium in the borderlands. Even a dead criminal could fetch five librae, with live captures going for ten to twenty; that was two to four times as much as usual. And if they had an official bounty on their heads...

“Once, I got forty drachmae for one bandit. It was originally supposed to be a five-drachmae bounty, but the official investigation found him guilty of so many crimes that the total sum blew up before I knew it. You can imagine my surprise when I went to collect my fee.”

Forty... Wait, forty?!

I almost fumbled my carrot in shock. In the corner of my vision, I could see that Margit’s hands had stopped moving too.

Wow. That was a decade’s work for the average farming family. Put to American dollars, that was like three-to-five hundred thousand greenbacks. While it was easy to imagine that the bandit must’ve been a formidable foe,

that was a ludicrous sum to earn for one feat.

Aha. So that's the kind of accomplishment that gets poems written in your name.

"Ah," he went on, "but there *are* a few bounties that are always active."

Glossing right past his prodigious payday, the saint nonchalantly reached for a new carrot as he began listing out infamous crooks whose evil knew no bounds.

Edward of Phimia, aka the Canton-Crusher, was a villain of the highest degree. Known for massacring entire cantons, he was active across a massive region to this day. He was a goblin who employed his own kin as the main officers in his operation, with undercover moles spread far and wide; his network allowed him to continue his murderous campaign free from prying eyes. He was so thorough that it had taken five years just for a single person to survive his destruction—until then, people had feared him as an unnamed and unknowable menace.

The deserter knight Jonas Baltlinden was just as infamous, having led his old crew into a life of crime until their numbers had ballooned to the triple digits. He had the manpower to fight imperial patrols head-on and *win*, making him a champion for the forces of evil. Once upon a time, he'd controlled his own fief somewhere on the frontier; unable to bear the tyranny of the lord above him, he'd revolted and taken to terrorizing the populace for his daily bread.

Perhaps the oddest of the bunch was the Femme Fatale: a codename for a prostitute—or perhaps a group of prostitutes—who targeted merchant caravans. Nothing of their true identity was yet known, save for their modus operandi of tearing convoys apart from the inside out. Said to be titillating beyond compare, they used their beauty to seize all that caught their eye, leaving only a campground populated with corpses. With so little about them certain, their dreadful means of murder had turned into something of an urban legend.

"Any of them would command a price of fifty drachmae at the very least—dead or alive, of course. But if you caught them alive, I wager they might even be worth as much as the Ashen King."

"*The Ashen King?!*" For once, Margit completely lost her cool.

The legendary Ashen King was the leader of a wolf pack that had wreaked havoc across the southern stretch of the Trialist Empire for years. He had neither been a massive phantasmal beast nor an accursed mystic mutant; it was precisely because he'd been a normal wolf that his reign of terror had earned him an undying epithet.

The most well-known fable was how hedge mages had poisoned livestock to become walking traps, only for the royal wolf to completely ignore *only* those animals. The economic damage he'd caused had been so great that the crown itself put a *hundred* drachmae bounty on the beast.

To this day, the Ashen King's drab gray pelt was worn as a cloak by the incumbent head of House Baden. The name lived on in infamy, passed down to scare children away from the forests at night, and in the tales of the heroic adventuring party that had finally ended the lupine terror.

On the other hand, I'd heard the tale also served as the greatest shame for the huntsmen of southern Rhine. That they hadn't brought down the beast themselves and let a crew of outsiders—to be accurate, though, the scout of the party had been a hunter—take their kill was pointed to as a failure of their craft.

Mention of the Ashen King was sure to stoke equal parts ambition and dread in any hunter; to have the villains of the region be likened to him left Margit's heart pounding. For all the care she put into her ladylike image, she was a huntress at her core. Why else would her girlish dress sense be crowned with the daggered fang of a wolf dangling from her neck?

"Still, it's too early for you two. You might be strong, but adventuring isn't war—don't push yourselves too far. The 'adventure' part of adventuring is about looking for fun in your work, not being reckless in the pursuit of glory."

Mister Fidelio's warning was mature, respectable, and exactly what an adult ought to say to a pair of young kids just getting started. Unfortunately, it was hard to tell whether the message was getting through to Margit, whose predacious instincts had completely taken hold.

"Oh, and one more thing. Some people are only 'adventurers' because they want to use the title as part of their schemes. If you want to get promoted

doing honest work, you're best steering clear of them."

"Do you mean clans?"

Mister Fidelio looked surprised that I knew what he meant, so I explained how we'd run into Miss Laurentius's crew. His face scrunched up as if to say, *Oh...those guys.*

"Do you have some kind of bad history with them?" I asked.

"Not really. They're... Well, they're not the savoriest group, but I'd say they're one of the better ones. Actually, when you consider that they make their money from fulfilling requests, you could even say they're the cream of the crop."

We'd already heard as much from Ebbo and Kevin, but criminals were happy to abuse the privileges given to adventurers: namely, that we could be publicly armed without causing a scene.

As with any urban scenario, ill intent lurked around every corner and in every alleyway. I didn't need to be told not to deal with shady rogues; I wasn't planning on it anyway. My dream was to be an adventurer, not a mobster. At that point, I may as well have just stayed in Berylin to wait on nobles for the rest of my life.

"Work earnestly, and you can expect your first promotion in a little under half a year. It might come sooner if you happen to get wrapped up in something big, but the Association doesn't want to incentivize newbies to go chasing for miracles, so they try not to make any special exceptions. Take my advice and take it easy."

With yet another warning, our first carrot-peeling quest came to an end.

"Wow, things sure are quick with three sets of hands! And look at how pretty these are—you two did a great job!"

The missus came over in high spirits and placed yet another wooden crate on the kitchen table. As it turned out, our next quest was to peel and chop a different kind of vegetable.

Looking back, I'd been cutting a whole lot of ingredients and not a whole lot

of people lately. That was a good thing, of course, but it was such a profound departure from my experiences thus far that I was worried it would throw my senses out of whack.

We went about our business as the young couple of the house—relative to the official owner of the establishment, at least—began tossing things into a pot. Judging from the ingredients, today's main dish was going to be a milk-based soup. It was a widely known recipe in Rhine, and while it lacked the viscosity of Earth's cream stews, I loved the uncomplicated sweet flavor.

The peeling continued until just before noon. Our hosts said they'd take care of the rest, so we got a chance to rest until lunch was ready. Their bread-baking and seasoning processes were the lifeblood of their industry, and they didn't want us sneaking a peek while they were working.

Kind as they were, they had a clear line that wasn't to be crossed. That was fine by me: in the realm of business, this sort of attitude was more agreeable than one-way charity. Ours was an employment relationship, and having defined boundaries made navigating it much easier.

Margit and I found a bench under the eaves of the courtyard, where we sipped on water and watched the dribbling skies. Plain as distilled water was, it tasted incredible after a long session of labor. We still needed to unpack our luggage and move in, so our first real drinks here would have to wait until nightfall.

"You know..." A quiet voice tugged at my attention, and I glanced over to see my childhood companion holding her cup with both hands, staring at the surface of her drink. "I didn't realize the frontier would be so rife with *game*."

Filtered through the shadow of rainclouds, the sun bounced off her amber eyes as a dim, deep gold. The emotion burning on the other side of those irises was excitement—more than that, *hunger*.

As was a matter of course. To hunt was a huntress's purpose; how could she resist her own enthusiasm, confronted with marks on par with the most hallowed game ever to be hunted?

Ah, but I shouldn't mislead. The biggest reason she was so motivated was the same as mine: because both of us had grown up in the same rural canton. To

forgive those who attacked similar communities and raided the caravan lifelines that supplied them was too great an ask for us. These killers were the bane of our parents, brothers, and sisters; what wealth our friends and families built through their daily toil, these animals tore down through violence. Just the thought that they might be living in comfort was unbearable.

Trying to imagine *our* hometown being subject to such atrocities was enough to unhinge my mind. Villains of their grade were best off hanged on a highway by their own entrails until they rotted to the floor—anyone raised in the countryside knew this feeling well.

“Want to go after them one day?”

My tone was teasing, but the question was earnest. She looked up and met my gaze. The corners of her lips pulled all the way back to unveil her disproportionately long fangs.

Her face was as cute as ever; her smile, though, was hideously frightening. That was all the answer I needed.

Suddenly, I felt like I could smell blood. Staring at her long, long fangs resurrected memories of that moment on the twilit hill when they had sunk straight into my earlobe, as if to enshrine our oath.

“Erich?”

I’d lost myself for a moment in sentiment, until Margit tugged me out of it by the hand. I looked down to realize that the smell hadn’t been a memory-induced hallucination at all: a small bead of blood oozed out of my left thumb.

“Aw, man... I must’ve cut myself.”

In all likelihood, I’d cut myself while peeling veggies. Maybe it had been when I’d nearly dropped that one carrot upon hearing about the forty-drachmae bounty.

The cut was invisibly thin. It’d probably opened up when I first grabbed my cup; before that, it hadn’t bled or even hurt, and had been impossible to notice.

Still, this was seriously embarrassing as a swordsman. Cutting myself with my own blade wasn’t just a blushing matter; this represented seppuku levels of

shame. If the guys in the Konigstuhl Watch ever heard about this, they'd never let me hear the end of it. *Thank goodness no one knows me out here.*

Figuring I ought to treat the wound, I reached for my waist pouch to get something to sanitize it—until my hand jerked suddenly forward.

What followed was a warm sensation that sent an all too familiar shiver across my spine. I glanced over to find my thumb squarely inside of Margit's mouth. She stared up at me, unblinking, as she rolled her tongue across the wound. Again and again, beyond any reasonable doubt that her work was done.

For a short while, my entire world was dominated by the warmth of her tongue and the golden glow of her eyes. The pitter-patter on the eaves above felt unreal, as though everything beyond the knuckle of my thumb had ceased to exist.

Yet the eternity of surreality ended in but an instant. Her lips pulled away with the faintest of smacks, leaving behind a thin silver thread that stretched and stretched, desperately trying to bridge the widening gap. Eventually, it snapped.

My cut no longer bled.

"This will have to do for now," she said.

The huntress smiled; I smiled back, the usual sweet chills zipping down my spine.

Maybe all that these eyes behold are but prey to be hunted...

[Tips] Marsheim's central square is ordinarily home to a lone bronze statue of the original Margrave Marsheim. However, when a big catch is dragged in, it becomes the scene of a grand spectacle.



Summer of the Fifteenth Year

City Adventure

Classic adventuring resides in the realm of hack ’n’ slash, but all the swords and magic in the world will not stop urchins from crawling the streets. The maze of people and bricks cannot always be solved with tried-and-true methods: even should force be forced, violence will not necessarily tie everything up neatly in a bow as it does in dungeons.

I did my best to calm my unsteady breathing as I sprinted along. My arms and legs swung wildly in tandem to turn my body into a machine only focused on a few simple tasks: leap forward, land, repeat.

Rooftops were the pinnacle of instability. They were mere smatterings of shingles laid atop somebody or another’s ceiling, and were woefully unfit for running. The uneven footing clawed at my toes and heels, and nature had left invisible traps in the form of worn adhesives that gave way if I dared place weight on what it held down. Slopes meant to ward off rain vexed me to no end, turning the task of running in a straight line into a challenge. My slanted soles struggled to find any sort of grip.

But worst of all, one mistake could turn into a full-fledged tumble because the lack of purchase made it hard to right my balance once tipped.

As if on cue, a carefully taken step caused the shingle beneath to tilt—the whole damned roof was probably rotting—and with it, my body. I flailed my arms to correct my upper body and forcefully skirted my foot to the left. I could tell I was straining myself in doing so by the soreness in my sides and thighs, but I didn’t have time to care.

Mensch really weren’t made for the rooftops; this was the domain of peoples far more elegant and lightweight. Though I could kind of, sort of mimic their ways, there was no way I could pull off the same stunts.

“Whoa?!”

Yet I had a reason to be up here with my heavy frame and two clumsy legs: I was on the chase.

A little ways away, a tall siren was strolling along on the rooftops, and my target slipped underneath his wings. The damn trickster was doing this on purpose just to toy with me, I bet.

“Excuse me!”

“Wha—a *mensch*, too?! Hold it, kid! You can die up here, you know?!”

I casually raised my hand in response, but the thoughtful humanoid bird of prey was right in every way.

We were three stories up, after all.

A quick eyeball measurement told me I was at least ten meters high. Below was a street of stone-packed dirt—one slip would easily see me break bones or even die. No matter how well I rolled off the momentum, my mensch frame just wasn’t made to take falls from this height.

In retrospect, I felt like a lot of tabletop games had maintained fall damage as a lethal threat even for high-level PCs. Longer drops often came with extra *dice* worth of damage that went straight through armor, often only mitigable by magic or mystic tools. The greatest heroes still had to live in fear of gravity.

From where I was now, I could see a cruel GM refusing to even let me roll the dice, instead handing me a blank character sheet with a wicked smile.

And my mark knew that damn well. That’s why he’d chosen to run here.

“Feel free to chase after me, but just know that the consequences are yours alone.” He hadn’t said it out loud, but the sass was written all over his face whenever he glanced back over his shoulder to confirm I was still struggling.

Argh, dammit! Just sit there for one second—I dare you! You’re so mine!

Alas, the perp hopped away, putting one rooftop after another behind him. At times, he landed on thin ground that hardly looked to have a foot’s worth of clearance, only to leap up unscalable walls in the next beat.

Keeping up was taking everything I had. Just as the season had started, I'd been deliberating between Agility and Stamina as my next stat to invest in...and I'd chosen the latter, leaving me without the requisite speed to catch up. Wait, no—perhaps it was more accurate to say that my newly leveled VI: Superb Stamina was the only reason I hadn't been shaken off yet, as pitiful as I looked.

Still, I had to admit that his movement was impressive. Not only did he have the snap decision-making skills to find the hardest path for me to pursue him on, he also tossed in the occasional feint in order to take advantage of how bad the mensch body was at pinpoint turns. Yet in spite of it all, his perfect form showed no signs of fatigue.

Dammit! You're telling me I managed to string along the jagers and Berylin city guard, but this guy is making me look like a total chump?!

"Wah?!"

A frantic step saw me catch air. I'd landed on a shingle that seemed normal at first blush, only to slide right out of place as soon as I'd put weight on it. It was a case of loose adhesive, as I'd previously mentioned...and it was sliding straight off the edge.

The world looked curiously horizontal as momentum took hold of my trajectory through the air. I'd already lost control, and no amount of limb flailing would keep me upright now.

Accepting my fate, I rolled shoulder-first onto the roof to spare myself from total slippage. I was met with a sharp pain in my shoulder for my troubles, but it still beat a trip to ground level; I'd take aching when I turned in my sleep over never feeling anything again any day.

Besides, now that we were *here*, I didn't need to catch up. The job was as good as over.

"Margit!"

"Right here."

Her response came almost before I'd finished calling. Just as the perp tried to leap to the next building, an arm shot out from the gap and caught him right by the neck. Shocked, our target shrieked like a screeching cat.

Er, well...more accurately, he *was* a screeching cat.

“Finally caught you,” Margit said, lifting up our feline foe.

The little escape artist thrashed around in a whirlwind of black, gray, and brown, but he was up against a huntress used to handling game many times his size. Margit’s grip didn’t budge in the slightest.

“Owww... Give me a break, you little fish thief.”

You heard me right: today’s quest was to hunt down a cat who’d swiped some fish and bring him back to the requester. That, and twenty-five assarii for each of us, was all the reason we had for running around and working up a sweat.

“You may save your excuses for the judge,” Margit said to the mewing cat. “By the way, Erich, is your shoulder okay?”

“Ah, I’ll be fine. It hurts, but I broke my fall, so I’m sure I’ll be better once I take a bath and rest up.” I’d dug my shoulder into the roof to kill my momentum, but not so much that it’d affect my future performance. Plus, that maneuver had left the rest of me unharmed. “More importantly, I managed to stop that from falling.”

I nodded over at the loose shingle replaced back where I’d found it. I’d figured that letting it just fall was too dangerous and caught it with an Unseen Hand; in the worst case, it could’ve maimed someone down below, which would have been way more trouble than the chase was.

“I’m glad to have such a gentleman for a partner. Well, then. Shall we go turn in the runaway for our reward?”

“Let’s. Not that the pay is worth the effort, but still.”

Holding my aching arm, I followed Margit and the cat down. I had to slowly descend by catching myself on bumps in the wall, but my arachne companion quickly slid down a silk dragline of her own creation. I couldn’t have been more jealous.

Now that the job was done, let me clear up any possibility of confusion: this boring job was textbook adventuring.

Yesterday, we’d wandered around town all day to find a lost personal effect.

Scouring alleyways and digging through the mud between cobblestones to find a tiny ring had been monotonous beyond description. We'd gotten half a libra on account of the lost item's value, but it was hard to say the work had been worth it when looking at our dirty clothes.

The day before that, we'd been tasked with roof repairs that had consisted of going up and down and up and down, carrying shingles all the while. One might wonder why we'd been doing it instead of a tiler or plasterer, but such questions quickly disappeared when considering that a specialized professional would demand anywhere from two to four times as much as an adventurer's pay. Which, by the way, had been a tear-inducing thirty assarii.

Three days ago, we'd gotten something kind of adventurous in the form of a quest to act as a pub's bouncers...by which I really meant we'd cleaned and washed dishes for half a day. Never had I thought the day would come when someone would compliment me for "not breaking a single plate" or "actually wiping down the tables." Ten assarii each, for those wondering.

And today? We'd spent the day chasing down a cat on the rooftops. Surely, the youths of the world would drop their shoulders and sigh if they knew this to be the reality of a beginner adventurer.

But I liked it this way.

This was as fulfilling as new beginnings got. Of course, I loved the intermediate levels of a campaign where the party levels up, faces infamous monsters, and conquers legendary dungeons on their way to becoming walking myths. But I *really* loved the slow and steady progress of doing honest work as a novice.

At times, a lack of resources only enhanced role-playing flavor. Where a veteran party could solve issues with a single incantation from its mage, low-level PCs were gated by MP and had to think of clever ways of using everything at their disposal to save their most important resources for the inevitable climax.

For my money, *this* was what set TRPGs apart. Other games had checkpoints where magic was *the* solution, but the god of fate in a tabletop setting took a far more coercible form: anything could happen so long as the GM signed off on

it.

The work was tedious, but when I thought of it in the context of those beloved systems, I was even *glad* that it wasn't so easily bypassed. Margit wasn't quite as enthused, but we took a day off every three days, and I made sure to take her out for fun every time; hopefully, she'd bear with me for now.

Getting back to today's work, though, we'd made our way to the very brink of city limits. This was the Trash Heap: a gathering place for all the garbage in Marshiem.

That said, it wasn't a literal mountain of waste caused by people littering in the area. This was just the dropoff point for broken tools and the city's waste-collection services; it didn't smell particularly foul.

Unwanted goods were gathered here mainly to enable their reuse elsewhere. Furniture was often carried off for cheap by craftsmen looking to refurbish and resell; if it was really bad, it'd be chopped up and turned into firewood. Man-made bio-waste was kept in buckets—it was surprisingly odorless when properly stored—for later use as night soil. As for the mounds of miscellaneous compost, I'd been told that they were worth their weight in coin to the farmers in nearby cantons; apparently, the droves of merchants that swarmed in every spring to buy up this garbage was a sight to behold.

The city was, in and of itself, an organism. All that it produced had to be used somehow, lest the little beings who lived within slowly wither away. Efficient and eco-friendly—I was a fan.

Whatever couldn't be used in any other way was thrown into a giant covered pit. At the bottom of the hole was the same living blobs of hyper basic goop that kept Berylin's sewer system running. Clones of the original janitorial slime had been shipped across the Empire as a matter of course, absolving humanity of its perennial pollutive sin.

Margit and I weaved through the garbagemen and gong farmers—some were ex-convicts as evidenced by their tattoos, likely here on compulsory labor—to make our way to the "throne."

It was quite the gnarled seat of stature. Constructed of broken furniture and bed frames, the artless pile of rubbish looked like the work of a child who'd

spent their summer vacation on a haphazard work of arts and crafts.

Yet a regal being sat atop this throne: one large cat.

Other than the black dot on his face, the massive Lord Ludwig sported a luscious coat of gray and white. Note that the title was not for fun and games: he was, in very literal terms, the lord of all cats in Marsheim.

“Your Excellency,” I said, “thank you for granting us the honor of an audience.”

“As you have requested,” Margit followed, “we have apprehended your disobedient subject.”

Our grandiose demeanor and deferential bows were nothing of a game; cats were highly regarded in the Trialist Empire. All the largest cities in our nation kept a healthy population of feline helpers to hunt the pests and vermin that made their way into town.

That a lack of cats was correlated to the frequency of pandemics had been noted since even before the Empire’s founding, and there were records of many Rhinian city-states adopting similar cat-keeping practices even before imperial unification. We weren’t *just* following in those early states’ footsteps, however.

The other main reason was the existence of cat *lords*.

Common wisdom dictated that once some unknown threshold was reached in a city’s cat population, one outstanding specimen would emerge. That cat lord would then govern their feline subjects. If treated well, they would bring prosperity to the city; if treated poorly, they would vanish, taking the vital rat-slayers with them.

As such, imperial policy was to respect both the lord and their subjects in the name of the public good.

In the past, a magus had once offended a cat lord in an attempt to analyze their mysterious power. What had followed was a catastrophe so great that the history books elected not to reprint the details, noting only that it had come about at all. I would’ve needed access to the College’s forbidden vault to find out more, but it was safe to say that whatever happened, it had been *brutal*. Why else had someone like *Lady Agrippina* been careful not to rub cats the

wrong way?

The law punished the killing of a cat with a thirty librae fine or five years in iron shackles, no matter the circumstances. They were more thoroughly protected than some people, and I could honestly see why.

As for why we'd brought the runaway cat to Lord Ludwig, that was an easy one: he had been the one to put up the request for the little scamp's capture.

The cat lords of each city made sure to declare to their subjects, *Let thou not steal from the shops of this town.* Individuals who were stolen from were on their own, but in exchange for their cushy treatment, cat lords kept a leash on the feline population when it came to interfering with business.

Unfortunately, not all cats had the restraint to heed such warnings. Those that broke the rules received bounties so that the lord could personally scold them.

Naturally, the task fell to us adventurers, leading us on wild chases through alleys and across rooftops.

Towering at a meter long even without counting his tail, the regal cat majestically rose and leapt to the ground with an air of silent fury. He slowly approached the cat trapped in Margit's hands.

The fish thief seemed terrified: his ears were flat and his tail curled in between his legs. The lord cared not, batting aside the notion of pity with a huff of his nose; he leaned right in and scowled with such menace that even I was impressed.

Our perp shrank away and yelped in terror. This satisfied Lord Ludwig, who then twirled around, reclaimed his seat, and began elegantly grooming himself.

I guess that's that.

As soon as Margit let go, the bad cat zipped off as though his tail had been lit ablaze. While it felt like he'd gotten off easy to us, it seemed like that had been a serious punishment in the feline world. His fish-swiping days were over, no doubt.

I swallowed back the urge to ruffle Lord Ludwigs floofy-woofy coat of fur and

took another bow before putting the throne behind us. Too busy setting his tail, he didn't even glance our way—it looked like everything was back to business as usual for him.

The cat is in his nap spot, and all is right with the world...or something.

"*Mrooow.*"

Suddenly, a pure white cat came out of the cottage's shadows and cried at us with a little bag in its mouth. I extended an open palm, and it dropped the pouch right into it.

Opening it up, I found the plaque confirming that we'd finished the job...and a smooth, shiny acorn.

"Well, well, well. Thank you kindly."

"*Meow.*"

I thanked the cat for its troubles by scratching it on the head and under its chin until it eventually meowed in satisfaction and left.

The cat lord had not only obvious intelligence, but the ability to issue commands. It was clear that Lord Ludwig's position wasn't just the result of the margrave's personal preferences—though, admittedly, the Empire was full of cat-lovers—but rather a genuine tactical deal. I mean, some magia even speculated that they were divine beings who traced their powers to some unknown, ancient god.

"What a pretty acorn," I said.

"Perhaps there's something special about it."

I raised the sparkling acorn to the sunlight. It had an endearingly fat and round shape, and it looked more like an oak than a chinquapin. We wouldn't be able to sell this for money, but I had no doubts it was a first-class seed, considering how many rare knickknacks the cat lord had his subjects seek out.

Might as well take good care of it.

"This'll be fifty assarii, so that makes..."

"Forty-one in our shared purse," Margit finished.

The two of us always chatted about nothing in particular on our way back to the Association. Sometimes it was about work; others it was plans for our next day off; but today's topic was our finances.

Each of us would put away twelve assarii as our own pocket change, and we'd put the remaining twenty-six into our joint wallet. This was our payout for half a day's work, and we'd either need to find a quick job for the evening or do some grocery shopping and cook our own meals today to cut expenses. Although we weren't destitute, this wasn't enough to get comfortable.

That said, Marsheim saw a lot of traffic, which brought a lot of trade, which drove down prices—we were getting by. Fifteen assarii a day was enough to fund a humble life. Thanks to the missus's benevolence, we only paid five for our room every night, and we could get food costs down below ten if we really committed to frugality. The idea of upgrading our gear or buying arcane tools was comical, but we wouldn't struggle to put bread on the table.

Not that a life like that would be healthy or cultured, of course. If we were *really* down and out, we'd have to subsist on hard bread baked who-knew-when and milk well in the realm of souring. That could save us a few more coins, but it wasn't exactly a real option for adventurers whose health was a business asset.

While we'd promised to live simply at the start, neither of us wanted to lead demeaning lives, and so we ate proper meals every day. Not too luxurious, but not too meager—our spending was just right for a pair of beginners.

As an aside, the joint wallet Margit mentioned was only filled with the money we'd earned since arriving in the city. The one with all of our savings was sleeping safely in our lockbox.

Figuring that having too much money would only enable us to slack off, we'd proactively stashed away the bulk of our funds. It was just easier to motivate oneself when restrictions were at play. In my last life, I'd earned a decent salary, but tried to limit my spending to ten dollars a day; I'd also promised myself to use the stairs instead of the elevator if my destination was on the fifth floor or lower. That kind of thing.

Besides, we didn't want to attract the wrong kind of attention by spending

too lavishly as a pair of newbies.

“Do you want to go shopping on our day off? I was thinking about getting some more oil for the lantern.”

“That sounds lovely. The ribbon I use for my hair is fraying, and I’ve also been thinking about looking for a new piercing.”

“Another one? Your ears look full to me.”

Shifting to a much more fun topic—we were allowing ourselves each one libra per holiday from our stash as a treat for ourselves—Margit began to play with her ears. Personally, I thought they were too small to fit anything else without getting clunky.

Most of her accessories were simple ball studs or bar piercings. Though our matching pink shell earring—speaking of, mine hadn’t been jingling at all as of late—was the only one that had a chain, her ears were looking seriously full. I guessed she could *maybe* fit another one or two, but at this point it would be hard to find enough space for a new hole.

“Mm... It’s hard to think of where I’d like one next. Maybe my tongue?”

“Your tongue?!”

“Or perhaps my belly button.”

“Your *belly button?!*”

“What are you so worked up about? My mother has one for both, I’ll have you know.”

Y-Yeah, but... Come to think of it, I’d been put off when first seeing Miss Corale. But wow, was she going for some...*daring* spots.

“I’d forgotten to get one to celebrate officially becoming an adventurer, and I’d like to put it somewhere special.”

“Sure, but...doesn’t it hurt? I’ve heard that it’s rough while the wound is healing.”

“According to Mother, it isn’t that painful. Especially for the tongue, since it’ll be safe inside the mouth—though she did mention it had been difficult to speak

for some time.”

Margit was the epitome of nonchalance, but this was clearly a cultural splitting point between mensch and arachne. City-girls of every walk were liable to be seen with piercings on their ears, but the tongue and stomach were well outside the bounds of what the average person considered fashion. She’d even mentioned wanting to get a tattoo if she ever brought down a mark worth hunting; this was just something I’d have to accept as beyond my common sense.

Not that I could deny how it enhanced her bewitchment. The risque embellishments clashed with her natural looks in mysterious and enticing ways.

“Besides... It isn’t like I minded the pain the last time you *lent me a hand*.”

A ticklish chill ran up from the tip of my tailbone straight into my head. This partner of mine said some incredible things; I may have been used to lopping off fingers or arms, but drawing *her* blood was an entirely separate matter.

But I bet she knows exactly what she’s saying.

Before I could come up with a response, though, a shadowy figure came suspiciously close, bumping shoulders with me as he passed. The mensch in tattered rags didn’t even apologize before scurrying off into a small alleyway.

“Again?” Margit asked with a sigh.

“Yep. Again.” As I answered, I pulled out two coin purses.

The first was my personal pouch; I’d bought it soon after arriving, and it was a simple bag with a string to close the opening and keep the handful of silver and copper pieces inside.

The second was a coarse burlap sack bound with a strip of leather taken from gods-knew-where. I opened it up to a pitiful number of copper coins.

As of late, I’d found myself marked by pickpockets. Even though I was dressing in untailored clothes, perhaps just having the funds to bathe every few days was enough to give the impression that I had money; I was met with an attempt at least once every few days. I supposed this was the life of an adventurer without an organization to fall back on.

Truth be told, I'd been receiving invitations from a clan for some time now—or perhaps they were better described as threats. I'd politely turned down all the outright scouting attempts, and as a result, they'd begun to pull these sorts of "pranks" instead.

Looking back, it had all begun with my own rashness, as justified as I believed it was.

First had come the Heilbronn Familie.

We'd helped out as bouncer-slash-dishwashers several times at this point, and one day, a drunkard had come in absolutely plastered when the sun still hung high. When he'd gotten a little too handsy with a waitress, I'd stopped him—and that had been the start of it all.

The sad reality was that the women working at taverns had to accept "accidental" brushes across the rear as part of their jobs, but no one was expected to endure an uninvited hand in their chest. And when the unpaying drunkard had tried to pull her into his lap, I'd stepped in to put him in his place.

That said, it had gone down about as peacefully as it could have. I'd just flashed him my most Overwhelming Grin and said, "You look to be rather tipsy. Don't you think a nice nap at home would feel lovely around now?" Paired with my Oozing Gravitas that let my skill in Hybrid Sword Arts come through in Negotiation, the threat had drained the man's face of color instantly. My best guess was that the image of his head leaving his body if he tried anything funny had flashed before his eyes.

Compared to a violent beatdown, I'd been *very* amicable, I'm sure you'll agree. Besides, even if "bouncer" was only a nominal title, covering for the staff had been part of my job description.

What had surprised me, though, was that his friends had come back to repay the favor after he'd run away with his tail between his legs.

As much as I appreciated how the waitress had treated me to a free meal as thanks, she'd spread the story a little too far. As the story went, a young boy had chased off a member of the Heilbronn Familie—I hadn't been in the wrong at any point, but I'd ended up throwing dirt on their name.

My little combo had easily scared off the fodder, but now the whole clan had its eyes on me. While their upper officers had yet to make any moves, I couldn't deny that we were now at odds.

Yet it wasn't as if I could have simply abandoned my post. Margit had agreed that I'd done the right thing, so it really did seem like an outcome of unfortunate circumstance.

On top of that, I'd also drawn the ire of the Baldur Clan.

I had to admit that I'd been a little careless in this case. Margit and I had been out shopping on one of our days off, and I'd let myself get sloppy when touring the stands.

Tucked away in a cramped back alley, we'd found a stall peddling suspicious pharmaceuticals. I'd taken one look at the so-called healing potions and furrowed my brow: everything from the salves for cuts and bruises to the drinkable stomach medicines smelled so faintly of mana that I doubted they had any effect at all. My mistake, however, had been showing it on my face.

Freed from an environment where thinly plastered smiles were required, I'd let my poker face slip too much. By letting my emotions show, I'd clued the shopkeeper in on the fact that I knew their wares were bogus.

Despite selling stock that was all but an outright scam, the person managing the stall must have been a mage; in which case, it would be stranger to think they hadn't understood why I'd been staring. It was only natural that they'd have a grasp of what they were offering.

Taken alongside the whispers of forbidden concoctions that permeated the town, the low-quality wares painted a vivid picture of the kinds of people the Baldur clan was looking for. The business set up in a forgotten piece of real estate was, in all likelihood, a front for a pusher.

This way, they could lay low and keep the ostensible veneer of running a business in the one-in-a-million chance the authorities came knocking. Nothing on display had been meant to be sold. Had they been a grifter trying to market shady potions, they could've just done that in broad daylight; it was simple enough to find an example or two at the local bazaar. Anyone without an eye for magecraft had to rely on the seller to judge any given potion's efficacy, and

untalented salesmen were a dime a dozen. Seeing one trying to pass along bad stock that they'd been tricked into buying by their supplier was common.

Yet I'd made a terrible mistake: I'd unveiled that I had a knack for the arcane to a group of people constantly hungry for knowledgable dealers. I had to admit, I'd just let my guard down.

Honestly, why were we people so bad about that? I'd spent so much time perfecting the ultimate social armor—a vaguely polite smile—but the second I started having fun, it had gone straight out the window.

Ever since that incident, hooded figures had begun trying to approach me. Thankfully, Margit led me away whenever one drew near, but I had a bad feeling that this would become a major pain if we didn't do something soon.

Were all shady clans in cahoots or something? The worst part was that it almost felt like they were all passing around the intel that I was unaffiliated. Without that knowledge, they wouldn't dare to harass me so frequently.

Well, I had a lesson for these sorts of rude visitors, and boy was I charging tuition. Whenever they came by, I swiped their purses and replaced them with small stones wrapped in scrap cloth.

In case you were curious, this trick didn't take any magic—I didn't have Divine Favor in Dexterity for nothing. I didn't need specialized knowledge for a little sleight of hand; I could do this with my eyes closed.

Hm, it's not quite enough to shell out for a nice dinner, but this'll do nicely to make our afternoon break a little more pleasant.

"Margit, what do you say we stop for tea before going to the Association?"

"My, that sounds delightful. I would love to."

The two of us turned into an alley of our own to get away before the fool realized he'd been counter-frisked. We still needed to iron out our evening plans, and a nice cup of the missus's tea was the best way to do it.

As much as I loved how quixotic the simultaneous tension between peace and danger was, I couldn't help but lament the infinity of ill intent that plagued the world. I'd known career advancement would come with unwanted attention

eventually, but *this* soon? Then again, laying down without a fight would just have led to us being exploited, so I didn't regret fighting back at all.

In good ways and bad, my time under the Ubiorum banner had come with the ability to snap back at any offense in plain view of the public; now, I was a replaceable adventurer without the protection of a backer. All I had to defend myself was my own skill—but that was a double-edged sword. To think, half a year ago I would never have imagined myself being *thankful* for having a master wordlessly reminding me that I could set off a war if I let myself get carried away.

A backer, huh? It wasn't like I *couldn't* find one, but I didn't want to eat my words to Miss Laurentius when they were still fresh out of my mouth, and relying on Mister Fidelio any more than we already were was just sad.

I guess I'll have to solve this one myself.

Toying with the extra change and listening to its sad, empty jingle, I shook off my doubts—this was just part of being an adventurer.

[Tips] Tattooing is the practice of using needles and other instruments to inject dye beneath the skin, practiced in some regions of the world. In the Trialist Empire, there are two kinds: those chosen as aesthetic statements, and those branded on criminals to mark them for their crimes.

The tattoo sentence is a form of punitive showmanship reserved for crimes that do not warrant corporal punishment but that cannot be written off as minor. These are mainly theft, robbery, or assault—only when caught, of course.

Late Summer of the Fifteenth Year

Urbancrawl

If the average adventurer is an expert in violence, then it is only natural that their clients bring violent jobs. At times, quests stray from respectable missing-person searches and bodyguard gigs to the realm of intimidation, robbery, and even wetwork.

The honest must be ever vigilant, not resigning themselves to complacency—for the city is a living beast, its mouth forever gaping to swallow the innocent into its horrors.

As the jingling in my coin purse grew louder, so too did the voices who knew my name. Sometimes, it was the lively ladies working the Association's front desk; at others it was the day laborers I'd toiled alongside. But no matter who it was, it felt good to get a wave and a hello when passing a familiar face on the street.

"Here's your pay for the day."

"Thank you very much."

Miss Coralie placed three large copper pieces onto a tray and slid it through to my side of the counter. Each of the coins was a reward for its own job, and they totalled seventy-five assarii together. Though the early days had been a struggle, I'd learned the ropes and the lay of the land enough to plan out more optimal quest selections.

As I wrote my name on the confirmation-of-pay sheet that had been laid alongside the coins, Miss Coralie fiddled with a piece of wood and said, "You sure work hard, young man."

"Do you think so?"

On the side of the wood was an emblem and a six-digit number: it was the

proof of a job well done. Generally speaking, the Adventurer's Association received payment for any task upfront—though I'd heard some exceptions involving contracts did exist—and gave clients a wooden check in exchange. That was ultimately given to adventurers as a statement that they'd completed the work that had been asked of them. The system prevented fraudsters from extracting free labor and running off without paying.

For us adventurers, our usual routine was to go to the client, do our job, and then receive the wooden ticket that corresponded to the task at hand. Upon returning to the Association, they would skim twenty percent off the top and then give us the rest of what the client had deposited.

Having an organized system of what was basically temp workers ate away at the fantasy of it all, but it was effective enough that I was willing to bite my tongue. Without it, we would be at risk not only of scammers who didn't pay up, but also unscrupulous clients who wanted to squabble over rates *after* seeing what kind of work was done; everyone knew that adventurers were about the last people you'd want directly haggling with their clients.

Rather, if the Association *didn't* do this much, what point would there be in having them? It wasn't just one giant bulletin board: it was an organization that oversaw our actions in order to produce a reliable image from which all of us could benefit.

Clients won because they were less likely to be abused by thuggish adventurers; we won because we were less likely to be abused by shady clients. This win-win paradigm was the only thing keeping the tedium of bureaucratic overhead alive in this day and age. Otherwise, no one would choose to give up such a large cut of the total pay.

Adventurers were rootless grass. Poor conditions were more than enough reason to shift careers, and most had no savings to speak of. It wasn't as if we inhabited a world where nuclear arms were bought and sold without reserve—no one was sending our tax forms to some fixed address in the mail.

Naturally, then, taxes had to be paid in advance if the government wanted to get its share. Just like how office workers on Earth had let their companies deduct taxes straight from their pay, the Association was in charge of pulling

taxes out of ours.

“You only rest once every three days, group up a bunch of quests in the same area to do them all at once, *and* you don’t do a half-hearted job.”

I thought that made me pretty normal. Most of our work amounted to little more than fetch quests, so bundling up multiple gigs to increase efficiency was standard practice in both games and work. We unfortunately didn’t have the ability to tap on any point on a map to instantaneously travel to that location, and our low rates demanded that we find better ways of earning coin.

“Besides,” Miss Coralie added, “you haven’t slipped up once.”

“But I’ve been denied the completion ticket twice, you know?”

“Oh, please. That doesn’t count as slipping up.”

It wasn’t as if everything had gone perfectly. As flagrant as I felt it had been, I’d gotten proof of completion withheld by the client on two occasions for poor work. The first had been for mishandling cargo on a luggage-carrying job, and the second had been for being too slow when helping repair the city’s outer walls.

Both times, the Association had paid out upon explanation, but I felt that my inability to convince the clients themselves made those failures in TRPG terms.

That said, the world was full of scrooges trying to cut costs with false accusations, and the Association was well aware of that. Even without the wooden plaque, we were to report that the job was done. From there, the Association would investigate our performance at a later date; if it deemed we’d done well enough, we received our pay.

Although we would never see the inner workings of the system, I suspected that clients were internally rated just as adventurers were. I’d thought the place looked like a primitive bank when I’d first seen it, but I hadn’t realized it was like one systemically too.

“With how well-liked you are, I’m sure you’ll shake the soot off sooner than later.”

“Wait, really?”

“I can’t say *when*, obviously, but I’d get my hopes up if I were you. You and your pretty partner both.”

Wow, that’s great news!

To “shake off soot” was a fancy way of saying that I’d be promoted out of the soot-black tier. It was probably also a metaphor for cleaning off the mud of beginner chores and coming out the other side with a shiny red tag.

Looks like I’ll have to keep giving it my all.

I thanked Miss Coralie and left the front desk. We’d finished off three jobs today, so I figured this was a good stopping point, even though the sun was still up.

Margit had taken our belongings and gone ahead to the inn; maybe I’d grab a bite to eat before rejoining her. Despite being a legal adult, my body was still stuck in its growth spurt; my hollow leg had yet to fill in.

Such was blue-collar life, I supposed. Having been in a non-athletic club in school, I’d always wondered how my sportsman friends had fit in candy and beef bowls on their way home without stuffing themselves too much to eat dinner. But now, a lifetime later, I had my answer: the extra-large cup noodles they’d slurped down had been little more than a light snack.

Man, could I go for that grease right now.

Alas, no amount of wishful thinking would bring the fatty oils to my mouth. I’d have to make do with something I could actually find: maybe some boiled wurst, since I’d found a good street vendor for those recently.

I strolled outside, daydreaming of food until my path through the clearing across from the Association was suddenly blocked. Three men stood before me: a mensch, a werewolf, and a jenkin. Each of them was wearing tattered rags and had a face full of grime.

Bluntly put, they were the stereotype of low-level adventurers come to life.

“You. Give back wallets.”

Before I could ask why they’d gotten in my way, the werewolf leading the pack pointed at me and made his demand in broken Rhinian.

“Wallets? I’m terribly sorry, but I have no idea what you might be referring to.”

“No idea, no. My friends, all by you, gotten wallets.”

I tilted my head in genuine confusion, but upon second thought that did ring a bell. He was probably talking about how I’d given the idiots trying to pickpocket me a taste of their own medicine.

It wasn’t anything to celebrate, but I’d swiped my thirtieth purse just the other day. The occurrences had begun to ramp up, and this confirmed my suspicions that it hadn’t just been my tidy appearance: I’d been marked. Now it made sense why some of the more recent friskers had come at me with nothing to steal back in retribution.

Just to defend myself, my actions were standard practice in this land where the law did not permeate to the lowest layers of society. If people weren’t allowed to stand up for themselves, then the dishonest would simply trample over the innocent; no one would fault me for what I’d done. That these cretins had the gall to complain after instigating things to begin with betrayed an intense stupidity.

“I’m sorry, but I can only repeat myself: I have no idea what you’re referring to. Do you have any sort of proof? You could take me by the heels and shake me and all that’d come loose is my own wallet.”

I had no qualms of using what few legalities existed in this region to my advantage. With an angel’s smile and polite palatial speech, I played the part of a purehearted boy who’d never done any harm in his whole life.

“Shut mouth, kid.” The werewolf’s nose crinkled up in frustration. “No estimate the Exilrat.”

His thinly veiled threat was as boring as it was trite. Also, I was fairly sure he meant to say “*under*estimate,” but whatever.

The Exilrat were one of *those* clans that Kevin had told us about. That was the one made up of wandering immigrants who’d set up tents and shacks outside the city walls. If I recalled, they took a large cut from the work of their members.

It wasn't difficult to imagine what a bunch of poor wayfarers would do when in need of money—evidently, the shoddily dressed pickpockets wandering the city were part of their crew. My guess was that the organization acted as a full-blown crime syndicate, pocketing a share of the illicit gains made in their territory.

"Give back money by tomorrow. All is one gold piece."

Ha, what a sum! I almost failed to hold in my laughter.

One gold piece? Who did they think they were? They were really pushing their luck with this. I could add up all the money I'd received and double it only to *still* be half a drachma short of that.

But their lack of ethics was no invitation for me to stoop to their level. I'd *just* been told that promotion was on the horizon, and I didn't want to blow it now—infighting between adventurers was a big no-no.

At the very least, I wasn't going to start a fight in broad daylight.

"Let me say this one more time: I know nothing about your friends' wallets."

Instead, I took the diplomatic approach. Sure, I could let it get to my head and cuss them out or beat them silly, but the temporary satisfaction would come with a slight on my reputation.

Honestly? These clowns weren't worth my time.

"If you absolutely insist that their money was stolen, then you're free to file a proper complaint. Fortunately for you, the Association is right there. I don't see a 'Closed' sign on the door—do you?"

I gestured toward the building with a bit of exaggeration, and the men grew visibly angrier. They knew as well as I did that reporting the issue was an impossibility.

Crimes first became crimes only upon the discovery of evidence. I was the neatly dressed, well-liked newbie; they were the two-bit hoodlums. Who was going to believe that *I* had frisked *them*? True, I had technically engaged in criminal behavior...but however were these gentlemen ever going to prove that?

Nobody here was going to interrogate me with a mystic lie detector, and I'd tossed every coin pouch the day I'd gotten them. It wasn't as though the coins had their names written on them, so those would amount to nothing. These weren't serialized bills tracked by a central reserve, but chunks of metal minted by molds. At most, any given coin had a few quirks of production—hardly enough to identify.

You're free to report me. Good luck getting them to listen, though.

I was free to act as righteously as I wished. That I'd fought fire with fire was a detail best left unspoken.

I know I fell back on this phrase a lot, but these dependable words came straight from the avatar of an evil god who probably had at least eighteen APP: it isn't a crime if you aren't caught. It wouldn't be fair if I was always on the receiving end of that saying, now would it?

"Well, then. If you'll excuse me. I'm hungry after a day's work, and my partner is waiting for me." I turned in the direction of the nearest city guard; engaging with these fools would earn me no honor or experience.

"No look down us, kid."

"Who knows what happen to your girl."

...But some things just shouldn't be said.

I'd stopped in my tracks before I knew it, and my hand was halfway toward reaching for the fey knife. If I hadn't left Schutzwolfe at home on account of the day's peaceful itinerary, I surely would have reached for her instead.

A creaking chorus of love echoed in the back of my mind as the Craving Blade sang her merry song. If I needed a weapon, the cacophony whispered, she was ready at any time.

I took a deep breath. *Calm down—this is no place for bloodshed.* Not only would it hurt my reputation to slice up a bunch of forgettable crooks, but I'd just decided that they weren't worth my time.

Besides, you're not so easy that these chumps could sate your craving, are you?

Haah... Okay, I'm calm. I wanted to take a puff to cool my head further, but I'd make do for now.

This was a small-time spat. It wasn't enough to get the whole of their clan on my back—I doubted the fools had even reported it to their superiors. No pickpocket wanted to go to their boss and admit they'd gotten their own wallets swiped by some amateur; that was grounds enough for punishment, and they wouldn't so much as mention me until they'd won back their pride.

So this was a petty provocation. So very petty...

"Oh, by the way, I forgot to mention." It only made sense for me to respond in kind. "I think there might be something wrong with your shoelaces."

As soon as the words left my mouth, I walked off. They naturally tried to follow, but all I heard was the sound of three dominoes toppling.

There had been a few onlookers who'd been waiting to see how things would pan out, but I doubted any had expected for the three buffoons to have their shoelaces tied to each others'.

That was my parting gift to them, courtesy of a few Unseen Hands. I hoped they appreciated the knots; I'd picked the most secure ones I knew.

I'd figured they were due for a lesson: you can't take back your words, and some things just aren't meant to be said. I knew that Margit wasn't just a pretty damsel waiting to be thrown into distress—if they tried anything, she'd reduce them to three lost lambs. Yet the likelihood of danger was irrelevant; the intent alone had gotten to me.

It looked like the situation was only going to get more convoluted. But I maintained that quietly letting them make passes at my own wallet wouldn't have been a smart move either, so perhaps this had been unavoidable. Even if it hadn't, I couldn't turn back the clock to redo things now.

Despite only just having mentioned how nice it was to be known, I supposed making a name for oneself was a double-edged sword. Not everyone who remembered my face was someone I wanted to interact with.

I decided to take a break before heading back to the inn. A cup of tea and a puff of smoke were in order; I didn't want to deliver disheartening news in a

bad mood, after all.

[Tips] Imperial law highly values material evidence, and disputes between commoners tend to place the burden of proof on the accuser. The accused is therefore considered innocent by default and has no need to preemptively plead their defense.

I gulped down a lungful of morning air. Heralding the impending end of summer, the cool breath purified me from the inside out.

I drew Schutzwolfe as if in ritualistic prayer and picked up the shield Lady Agrippina had given me. Cheating to the right, I covered my upper half with the circle of wood, making sure to steady my blade behind the cover of my frame. Perfect for both offense and defense, mine was a textbook form polished to mastery.

A stab hidden by my shield; a shield bash that let into a cut; a fake opening baiting out the opportunity for a sideways slash—the angles of attack were limitless, but my stance was singular: a precise posture that could transition into an infinite web of possibilities as the need arose. I continued striking without pause, my legs constantly moving in a flowing dance.

Most of my work around town had been physical, but I'd thankfully never run into the need to solve things with force. These early hours when the Snoozing Kitten's courtyard was empty were my chance to keep my skills sharp; so long as I didn't make too much noise, I was allowed to train here before the other guests awoke.

Unfortunately, that offer hadn't included any training sessions with Mister Fidelio. The sad reality he'd brought up was that we practiced totally different styles; simple training wouldn't benefit both parties.

I slowed my breathing, concentrating on keeping a steady pulse. Every facet of my body was the basis of attack, of defense. Undue exhaustion or exhilaration served only to muddy the arc of my blade.

I had to remain tranquil—like ice upon a lake, or the still waters beneath.

As I swung my sword, I felt a gaze upon my back. It wasn't an unwelcome one: intense as it was, I felt no hostility, but only a sense of curiosity.

That, and a level of observation that spoke to the onlooker's keenness. I felt the watchful eye shift from my knees to my shoulders to my elbows, dialing in on every joint. I could try to obscure my intentions with a clever flick of the eyes, but these three fulcrums could not lie. My movements were being read straight from the source. There were ways of using that to produce even trickier feints, but that was an arms race as infinitely futile as radar and its counters.

I continued my routine until I was satisfied, and my audience of one clapped. Turning around, I found a large, bald man leaning against the door back into the building. Sporting as menacing a smile as ever, Mister Hansel waved me over.

"Good morning, Mister Hansel."

"Heya. Sure are diligent, ain'tcha, Goldilocks?"

My morning's greeting was met with a peculiar response.

"Goldilocks? I mean...that's true, I suppose, but why call me that?"

"Don't tell me you haven't heard. That's you, kid. Been hearing word about 'Goldilocks Erich' around town lately."

Apparently, the unimaginative nickname wasn't a product of Mister Hansel's personal sensibilities, but the collective sentiment of the people of Marsheim.

"Word of you and 'Margit the Silent' has been making the rounds between adventurers, y'see. You don't think I just go to pubs to drink, do you?"

Without my knowing, the both of us had gained a reputation—and with it, epithets. It wasn't like we'd done anything special: our schedule consisted of the usual odd jobs and two exceptional occasions on which Clan Laurentius had invited us to fill up spots on a security detail. Soot-blacks like us ordinarily wouldn't be able to accept those sorts of requests, but the story was different if a higher-ranked adventurer invited us; we'd taken the opportunity to follow along.

Even then, it had been easy work without any excitement to note. If nothing else, I saw no reason why we would become the object of rumors around town.

“Heh, don’t get it? Earnest work’s the fastest way to get yourself out there. Be proud that you’re getting attention without causing a big fuss—no bigger honor than earning people’s trust without crutching on someone else.”

“Um...thanks. It doesn’t feel very real, though. I might be able to understand if we’d rounded up ten or twenty bandits, but we haven’t done anything of note.”

“You’ve been listening to too many poets, kid. The world ain’t as dramatic as they make it out to be.”

The man’s giant chest bounced up and down with laughter, but his dismissal wasn’t very convincing when a full campaign’s worth of travel gear rested by his feet. He had a backpack stuffed to the brim, with two extra sacks tied up to be slung over his shoulders. That wasn’t even touching on his hulking armor and weapon, ready to be wielded.

He’d arrived ready for a tussle, and there was only one thing that could mean.

“And? When are you gonna introduce us to Fidelio’s new charge?”

“Whoops,” Mister Hansel said. “Almost forgot about that. C’mere kiddo, lemme acquaintcha with the good folks of our saintly party.”

A young stuart hopped out from behind the luggage. He was roughly the same size as a goblin—or a mensch child—with mouse-like ears and a pointed nose. I pegged him as a scout on account of the many pouches on his belt and how his clothes clung close to his body.

That, and I hadn’t suspected his presence until the moment he’d unveiled himself. Perhaps I might’ve caught on had he exerted any hostility, but I would have been totally unaware if he were simply stalking me.

He’s the real deal.

“This little stuart’s our vanguard: Rotaru the Windreader.”

“Nice to meet you, Mister Rotaru.”

“Likewise. But don’t let Hansel fool ya—I don’t show up in the sagas no matter how much he goes around using my fancy nickname. Scouts aren’t supposed to show up, see, but I might’ve been too good at my job.”

“Too late to complain when you’re the one who slinks off every time the poets come to ask about our stories,” Hansel scoffed. “If you wanna have them sing your name, why don’tcha learn to butter up the writer-types?”

“If that was enough to make it, I wouldn’t be working this job, ya balding thumb.”

“Balding? I *shaved* my head, punk.”

The scout coolly waved off Mister Hansel’s retorts and called into the kitchen. A moment later, a head came poking out from just outside the door frame.

“What?”

For the first time since leaving Berylin, I laid my eyes on a methuselah. If that alone wasn’t rare enough, her skin was a solid brown color. Although she looked the part of a traditional fantasy dark elf, the pigmentation of her skin was just a byproduct of wherever she’d been born; just like mensch, methuselah were methuselah regardless of these minor exterior differences.

On top of that, her flowing inky hair and sharp, slender eyes came together to form an exotic beauty scarcely seen around these parts...but was quickly foiled by the whole fish tail sticking out of her mouth.

“What the...” Mister Hansel groaned. “Don’t you ‘What?’ us, Zenab. You’re the one peeking out with a full mouth.”

Upon having her social faux pas pointed out, the woman quickly wriggled the rest of the fish into her mouth. It didn’t do much to help her image, though, because there was still a bit of leek stuck to her cheek.

“There is none helping it. Once leave, we are far from Shaymar’s cooking for much time.”

“I get that, but...”

Her disembodied head popped back inside for a moment, probably as she rose from her seat. The tall methuselah reappeared as a whole person a moment later, though she’d decided not to unhand the plate of pickles she’d been enjoying.

“*Burp*. I am Zaynab, second daughter of Bassam, son of Qasim—helper of

Fidelio in magic. May I be of your knowing.”

Setting aside the audacious belch for a second, the woman’s speech had a peculiar intonation and rhythm to it—perhaps she hailed from the Southern Continent. Rhinian conjugation was rather complicated, and her limited willingness to engage with its rules made her seem strikingly foreign.

“Zenab, how many times do I have to tell you not to bring those pickles near me? That stuff’s too strong for my nose.”

“Why say you that? Stuarts can be eating even the rotten. What is a smell of vinegar to that?”

“*Can* eat is different from *will* eat, dammit! This is why every stinking idiot goes around offering cheese as soon as they see me...”

Although she had a refined air about her, her mannerisms and verbiage were that of a lowborn person. More notably, the name “Zaynab” was easy to mispronounce in Rhinian, but she seemed not to care: when the other two referred to her as “Zenab,” she showed no intention of correcting them. I doubted a noble of any make would put up with having their name mangled, let alone walk around nibbling on food—maybe she was a regular person after all.

Her voice was clear but deep, and my impression of her was that she seemed more like a fighter than a mage. Dressed in the traditional garb of a more equatorial region, her legs and chest were largely exposed; she didn’t look the part of someone ready to set off on a long campaign, but I supposed that was yet more proof that she was an exceptional mage. I’d just have to get over the fact that she looked the part of a literal sword-dancer more than anyone else I’d seen.

“This here’s a weirdo who came drifting into the Empire ’cause she wanted to eat the weirdest things she could find,” Mister Hansel explained. “Only reason she sticks with Fidelio’s to sink her teeth into the things he hunts down.”

“I come to search for the limbless drake, but too late,” she explained. “A shame.”

“If you ever come across an interesting kill, drop by and share some with her. She’ll pay whatever it takes to try out a new flavor.”

As it turned out, she was an eccentric. Though, in fairness, that should have been expected. If she was strong enough to not be dead weight in *the* Saint Fidelio's party, then she was a genius; anyone who stood near the top of the adventuring world was bound to have a screw or two loose.

Most people totally lost their marbles well before they set foot into the realm of inhuman power. That her brand of oddness was merely an epicurean diet was quaint in comparison.

That said...a *limbless drake*? Following a rumor all the way into the Empire just to try and eat a dragon definitely placed her firmly within the classification of a weirdo. Were those things even, well, *edible*?

"Guys. Don't cause a scene in the courtyard. You'll wake the guests."

Mister Fidelio came out, his bulky frame producing a mind-bending lack of noise. He was in a set of well-loved but quality travel wear, and his luggage was in hand. Behind him, the missus followed along carrying another bag.

"Ah, our bad, our bad," Mister Hansel said. "Just couldn't help myself when I thought about how the kids I brought in turned into celebrities."

"Can't skip on checking out the new competition," Mister Rotaru added. "Too bad the Silent isn't around though—I've been curious about the rumors."

"I don't want to be mean, but how many times do I have to warn you two that the way you deal with beginners is in bad taste?"

"Don't say that, ol' buddy ol' pal. Seeing the youngsters shine is a great thing, don'tcha think? C'mon, tell me: have you given 'em a lesson here or there yet?"

"I'm busier than you make me out to be. Preparing for this trip has been a lot of trouble."

Though the saint's words were admonishing, his tone was friendly; the atmosphere between the four veterans was perfectly amicable. It felt less like he'd given up on reining them in and more like he'd come to accept each of them for who they were.

This is great. I loved seeing their party dynamic, forged through countless experiences. There was a depth to their bond that couldn't be found in the

arm's-length politeness of newly formed groups.

Plus, their team composition was incredible: an impenetrable divine front-liner, an offensive vanguard, a scout who looked to be able to pick up slack in the middle of a formation, and a mage to handle the back line. Not only were the four of them entirely self-sufficient, but their arrangement was enough to make me feel nostalgic.

Then again, perhaps that was to do more with their numbers than their composition. I had plenty of memories of starting a new campaign only to ask, "Wait... Who's the sage? Don't we need to pass monster-knowledge checks? Who on this team can actually roll for *initiative*?" Perhaps the organizational part wasn't all that vital in drawing out my memories.

As I watched the four of them with wonder in my eyes, I realized that it wasn't just the party itself that was making me nostalgic.

"True, this one took a while," the stuart said. "Had to scout the location, gather intel, prep the gear... The hell? Why am I the only one doing all the work? You guys better pick up some slack."

"You have then my share of money. In exchange, I wish the best cut."

"Whoa, wait, you ain't already thinking about eating...whatever comes up, right?" Mister Hansel asked. "It's an ichor maze—we don't even know *what's* in there yet."

"Zenab," the saint pleaded. "All I ask is that you keep it within reason. I *will* stop you if our foes have two arms and two legs."

"Sirs," the methuselah said, hurt. "How do you make of me?"

"An omnivorous sinkhole."

"The personification of hunger."

"The tipping point from curiosity into plain hubris, barely crammed into a person's skin."

"*Very* rude." Despite her protests, the woman remained wholly unconvincing as she swiped the empty plate with a finger for the last of the pickle juices.

"Today's finally the day, isn't it?" As much as this pre-adventure small talk

reminded me of my fondest memories, they couldn't stand around forever; I figured I'd give them the little push they needed to get going.

I'd known that Mister Fidelio was setting off today well in advance. The only reason why I'd woken up early on a break day was so I could make sure to see them off.

"It is," the hero said. "I'll be gone for a while. I'm leaving the chores around here to you."

"Of course. Please enjoy your trip to your heart's content. I'll be waiting to hear a new epic about your travels."

My comment came straight from the heart, but it put a troubled expression on Mister Fidelio's face—and a smile on each of his companions'.

"Sorry kid, he's not a showoff by heart! But you've got my word: we'll drag back a good story for you!"

"You better not dramatize this one to the poets, Hansel. Half of the absurd tales in my name are *your* fault."

The pair elbowed at one another's sides as they bantered back and forth, but a palpable excitement filled the air; giddiness simply radiated off of them.

In contrast, the missus watched over them with the smile of a mother seeing her children off to school. Just how many times had she watched her husband set off on another faraway journey?

Suddenly, I noticed a presence at her feet: it was Margit, carrying a bag big enough for her to hug. She'd been sound asleep when I'd first gotten up, but here she was helping the missus with her chores. Maybe I should've done the same instead of training out in the yard.

When our eyes met, she teased me with a giggle: *You still have a long way to go,* it felt like she was saying.

"Ooh, I *thought* I noticed someone. So that's where you were. Mm... Hm... Not bad."

"Save it for later, Rotaru. Time won't wait for us... Isn't that right?"

Unlike me, Mister Rotaru had noticed Margit from the beginning. Maybe this

was a sign to dip deeper into presence detection skills...but the opportunity cost of investing in combat was steep. I was content with my magic for the meantime, but I still had room to grow as a fighter, and I definitely needed another boost to negotiations.

Pushing my internal struggle aside, our farewells took place at the kitchen door. They didn't want to march to the city gates with a big group and garner too much attention, so we were to stay here.

I could only dream that, one day, *I* would be the one setting off on a journey as thrilling as theirs.

"Mmkay then. Be careful, darling."

"I will. I promise to come home safe."

The couple leaned in and placed kisses on each other's cheek. Then the missus pulled out a flintstone and struck it a few times, scattering the sparks onto her husband. It was a ritual for safe tidings: fire was the Flame God's wordly avatar—that is, the Father God's first son. His embers were said to dispel evil and ensure a traveler's safety.

Shouldering all manner of emotion and expectation, the adventurers set off, their backs brighter still than the dawn's first rays.



One day, I thought. *One day I'll set off just like that.*

Now if only this unimaginative epithet could be the first stepping stone to that goal...

[Tips] Rituals for safe tidings vary by deity and tend to involve actions pertaining to the chosen god's divine jurisdiction. Among the better known are Sun God worshippers striking flint, Night Goddess believers drinking water left to sit out under moonlight, and Harvest Goddess adherents sprinkling the grains of one stalk of what from the year's harvest on the traveler.

Ever hushed and perennially hidden in her flashier partner's shadow, the Silent—as she had come to be known—found herself walking the streets of Marsheim alone.

There wasn't any special reason as to why she was by herself. Her partner had simply gone off to the stables. Their horses got cranky if he didn't visit every now and again, so he regularly stopped by to take care of them. But the arachne was too small to be of any help caring for the impressive steeds, and had thus decided to spend her afternoon wandering elsewhere.

She made her way to the marketplace in search of something that might make for a good supper. Every so often, she passed by a stall with imported accessories that she perused to kill time.

Today was shaping up to be a lucky day: she found something she liked. It was a necklace with a teardrop of blue glass hanging off. Apparently, it had been repurposed from a shard of foreign glasswork. Yet despite being relatively inexpensive thanks to its improvised history, it boasted a color hard to come by in the Empire.

One silver piece may be out of reach for a child shopping on their allowance, but the girl had plenty of money. A libra for something like this was a steal.

Still, she was not so easily persuaded. Only after confirming that it was built to last would she reach for her purse; besides, any chips or scratches could be grounds for a discount.

The arachne held it up toward the sun; daylight filtered through, splashing onto her face in an intricate and altogether novel shade of blue. Why, this was the color of her fateful partner's eyes.

Smitten by the translucent azure, the girl didn't even bother haggling the price down. She bought it right away. Part of her reasoning was that a giant wolf fang wasn't exactly fitting whenever she decided to dress up, but the truth was that the color had simply entranced her.

Prettying herself with the boy's colors had meaning enough to excite her; she pressed a silver piece into the shopkeeper's palm with great enthusiasm. Wasting no time, she looped the necklace around her neck and walked off in a merry mood.

As busy as the streets were, a little familiarity was all it took for her small frame to become a boon in weaving through crowds. The huntress had spent years navigating dense foliage; now that she grasped how it ticked, a forest of two-legged trees posed no more challenge than an empty plain.

Satisfied with her shopping, the girl wondered what she would do next. Perhaps she'd find a drink and snack to surprise the boy and lift his spirits after enduring the messiness that came with animal care—or perhaps not.

An ominous presence nipped at her senses. This was not the savage ferocity of a wild beast ready to kill, nor the cold edge her partner flashed to his enemies. It was a slimy, oozing malice that could come from no animal but man.

In an instant she switched from maiden to huntress and her honed body sprang into action. Jumping spider arachne were not to be taken lightly on account of their small stature: within their tiny bodies hid the potential for explosive action. In other words, their strength could only last for an instant...but it was *tremendous*.

Grabbing the daring hand reaching for her shoulder, the arachne twisted its fingers with all her might.

A gruesome scream mixed into the sound of breaking bones and tearing tendons. Using the torque of her turn to twist the hand further, the huntress extended her retribution to the crook's wrist and elbow.

Hers was a traditional martial art passed down among the fighters of her people. Though a disparity in height often seemed to be a disadvantage, she could use the natural leverage to her own ends and push back the hand while forcibly contorting it.

Panicked, the man tried to pull away, but it was too late. She was an arachne huntress, famed for taking down foes many times their size with nothing more than a dagger; he was a pitiful mensch, unable to shake her off.

The huntress carefully observed her prey as it writhed and desperately pulled away. He was a mensch wearing tattered rags, sporting a scraggly beard, and missing a few teeth—just a typical lowlife with little to his name. Whether he was a thief or adventurer was hard to gauge, but his off-hand had dropped a dagger; he certainly didn't have any good intentions.

Knowing that her full strength wouldn't last long—ten seconds, if that—the arachne swiped his dagger and skittered off in a hurry.

"Hey! Wait, brat!"

"Ow! Owww! My hand! It won't move!"

"Damn! You, stay! We, go!"

Two pursuers chased after the fleeing huntress. Both were dressed similarly to the first man, with the only difference that they wielded rope and a burlap sack, respectively; they'd come to kidnap her.

Considering the crowd, all they would need to do was cover her mouth and melt into the sea of people—not a bad plan by any means. They were experienced, too, judging from the way they gave chase. If anything, their only mistake was that they'd thought of her as nothing more than Goldilocks's plus-one.

What a mess this has become, the little arachne thought as she ducked under the forest of legs. Shouts of "Move it!" and "Outta the way!" echoed out behind her; her every movement was an insult to the pitiful two-legged oafs bumbling into passersby.

Shaking them off would pose little challenge, but she stood out around these parts. Arachne were surprisingly scarce in Marsheim, and she didn't want to risk

a long test of endurance. If they had more kidnappers lying in wait throughout the city, she could be in real trouble.

But most of all, there wasn't the slightest reward for all the risk involved.

Hunting down a handful of unbathed ruffians would not improve her social status; the best that awaited was a bothersome investigation. If she went too far, she could even worsen whatever unwarranted grudge had fueled this episode. She was too clever to go on a rampage that would land herself into trouble—there were better ways of using the fools.

Weaving in and out of crowds to drown her chasers in people, the arachne enacted the next step of her scheme.

"Please, help! Oh, officer, won't you save me?!"

Putting on an embarrassingly cutesy voice, the girl ran to an unbusy city gate, squealing for the guards posted there. Combined with her babyface, the act was enough to spur the officers into action; they may not have been keen on working, but the responsibility that came with their post was enough for them to grab their batons.

"Those bad men are chasing me! They're trying to hurt me with knives!"

Years of palatial speech dissolved in an instant as she played up her image as a poor, helpless child. Shocked into righteous fury, the guards jumped to their feet.

"What?!"

"You, freeze! Stop where you stand!"

The kidnappers tried to turn heel in a panic, but the guards' whistles were already blaring as both sides dove back into the crowds. Though the Ende Erde Watch weren't exactly the most enthusiastic, they weren't heartless enough to abandon an innocent victim in immediate danger.

While pretending to let a worried guard console her, the huntress's mind drifted to two thoughts.

First was the cynical realization that her appearance was rather useful for the purposes of manipulation. A few crocodile tears and a terrified scream were all

she needed to instantly paint someone as the villain—that was quite the nifty trick. Had her partner been here to witness her calculating scheme, he surely would have shivered in fear and muttered something about Sociability bonuses.

Second, the constables' willingness to help proved that their enemies didn't have enough grease to put in people's palms. Had her partner's musings about having turned an entire clan against them been right, the police would have left her to dry; that was just how Marsheim worked. Whether they witnessed a kidnapping or stabbing, the guards would do little to impede those who pulled their strings. At the end of the day, a stranger's life and pride in one's career meant precious little to them if a silver piece just so happened to fall at their feet.

So while it was vexing to have her pleasant afternoon ruined, this was a useful morsel of information.

She needed to regroup with her partner as soon as possible to deliver the news. And while she was at it, she'd make him fawn on her out of worry. On second thought, considering what she stood to gain...perhaps she ought to work on her fake tears a little more.

[Tips] Bribes are an effective means of getting one's way in any city—that is, unless the guards are well-paid and well-honored.

I never thought I would truly know what it meant to see red. The wooden mug in my hand creaked as it struggled not to spill its contents.

I knew I was a bit careless, but this was just too much. I'd gotten complacent, knowing how strong Margit was. Honestly, if it came down to an all-out, life-and-death, one-on-one fight, she was strong enough to kill me if I failed the first reaction.

But hearing that she'd *actually* been targeted made me so miserable that I wanted to cut myself open on the spot.

No, wait. Not me—at least, not first. I needed to hunt down the thugs who'd ambushed her first and line their heads—

“Calm down. Your bloodlust is flowing out in spades.”

Her small hands held me steady as mine trembled in rage. My gaze had been fixed on the desk in front of me, and she leaned over to force her way into view. The message was clear: *Don’t run off and start trouble on your own.*

“As you can see, they didn’t hurt a hair on me. As a matter of fact, the guards were kind enough to give me a candy drop. So won’t you calm down, Erich?”

“But...”

“Or do you think I don’t know exactly what you’re thinking?”

She pulled up close, her amber eyes staring into my soul from less than an inch away. I swallowed my breath, unable to say anything back.

Margit might not be the type to weave webs, but I felt utterly ensnared. It was as if she was using my sense of sight to fiddle directly with my brain. Maybe my many hours spent at one table or another offering up my investigator’s life in dutiful service to Atlach-Nacha was heightening my susceptibility to her persuasion.

“Tell me: is there anything to gain from letting anger lead your blade? Is a moment’s relief from fury worth a reputation as a violent and crazed aggressor?”

“No, but—”

“Would you please remind me how many groups have been bothering us as of late? Do you plan to cut down every last one on suspicion alone?”

“U-Um... No, but...”

“And even if they’d laid their hands on me...if you think that revenge would offset that, then I can’t help but laugh.”

The thought alone was enough to make me sick to death, but Margit simply let out an ice-cold scoff. Her smile was that of a woman jaded by the stupidity of men.

“Had they seized me, I should hope you would take care of me from then on. No lady wants the heads of fools lined up before her—do you comprehend?”

To be honest, I didn't completely understand. But I had at least enough INT to know that admitting as much was a bad idea, and nodded along. I supposed it was fair to say that hurting those who'd hurt her wouldn't suffice as far as taking responsibility for failing her went.

"Remind me, Erich: whatever did you come to this land at the ends of all earth to be? A petty criminal? A disgraced killer on the run?"

"...An adventurer."

"That's right. So what do you say to a smarter approach?"

I surrendered and took a deep breath. Asking for a moment to compose myself, I pulled my pipe out of a pocket for a puff of a tranquilizing herb. A favorite of mine, the drug filled my lungs and reason flowed into the empty pockets of brain space carved out by anger.

Come to think of it, Margit's report had come with *good* news too. None of the clans had mustered against us in full just yet. At most, it was a small sub-group—the leader of a minor faction, perhaps.

Then it was time to teach them a lesson: *You picked the wrong fight.*

"Thank you, Margit. I think I've cooled off."

Drawing my sword was easy. At this point, I could cut down legions of unskilled goons without relying on any hidden aces. I wasn't blind enough to deny the fruits of my training. But even a mad dog could howl and ravage, driven solely by a lust for blood.

Remember your roots! Who do you think you studied under? How many years did you spend with that wicked methuselah? What did she teach you?

To wait on a noble was also to witness their every move. I'd seen that scoundrel spew verbal poison with dazzling smiles more times than I could count, pitting her enemies against one another all the while.

I wouldn't see the same success as her; I didn't have as many pawns. But I had enough wits not to churn my brain into muscle and reduce every Negotiation to a physical stat check.

"We'll be smart and spill as little blood as possible," I said.

“Very good. That’s exactly what I wished to hear.”

To begin with, violence did solve every problem, but it was only to be used as a last resort. Cutting open a tangled knot was quick and satisfying, but the severed rope would never regain its lost form. Taking after Alexander the Great’s temper would win me nothing but ire without the authority to back it up.

Instead, I ought to think like an adventurer: snoop for intel, back my foes into a corner, and use irrefutable evidence to make them bow down in apology. If they *still* refused to bend the knee then, I’d be happy to rely on the ultimate problem-solver.

A riddler with unsolvable riddles was due an answer in fists. The question was meant to be thrown back at them: did they have a solution to punches?

The first step would be reconnaissance. Unfortunately for us, we had drawn unwanted attention from three different clans thus far, with each of the corresponding incidents limited to minor members of the orgs.

Cunning syndicates spanning a whole city could even try to frame their rivals for any given crime. I’d heard of such tactics in yakuza gangs: when felling one’s enemies was hard work, it could never hurt to use the public authorities as a weapon. I bet similar schemes existed no matter the era.

We also needed a fallback plan in case things went awry—even Lady Agrippina had drafted them. Failure wasn’t ideal, but it needed to be acceptable; any mistake could still be used to stir up trouble for the enemy. In the event they turned out to be simpletons incapable of reading past the surface layer, it was fine to laugh off one’s own safeguards as needless paranoia.

Adventuring was just a verbal boxing match with a sinister GM: no amount of distrust was too much. When every hackneyed story could come with a twist and every convoluted plot could trace the beaten path, it was best to stay sharp.

But to start, we were best off looking into the likeliest of suspects.

“You said they arrested the guys who attacked you?”

“That’s right. The guards managed to capture one of them. They’d sent me home thinking I was a little girl, but I’m sure I can return and ask for details as the victim in this whole affair.”

That’s a terrifying trick... I’d never thought of it, but she had the innate ability to convince practically anyone who didn’t know her that anyone else of her choosing was a downright villain. Come to think of it, some tabletop systems did include negotiation skills that touched on horrifying tactics like this.

Well then, we’d do well to make like the denizens of a haunted Tokyo and narrow down our suspects, starting from the most dubious, collecting every morsel of evidence we could on the way. Boy, I knew the ends of all earth were meant to be *exciting*, but I’d never anticipated that I’d have an urbancrawl show up practically at my doorstep.

“Then let’s take this slow and steady. We’ll make them pay.”

“Let’s, indeed. For the sake of working in peace.”

The timing was a bit unfortunate: our font of inter-adventurer affairs, Miss Laurentius, was out on a large-scale bodyguard operation requested by one of her most important backers; our veteran teacher Mister Fidelio was likewise absent. We’d practically lost contact with our most powerful connections.

But hey, this was just fate’s way of scolding me for trying to get my seniors to baby me. Even if they were around to help, it would be positively shameful to go and beg when I couldn’t so much as name my enemy yet.

If I wanted to be a cool adventurer, then I couldn’t exhibit such disgraceful behavior. Running the numbers on the coins in my wallet and the experience in my bank, my lips curled into a sinister sneer.

[Tips] Money can buy action, and not only from friends. At times, coin is enough to buy one’s enemies.

Crime was to be carried out under the veil of darkness, by hooded figures, only in locations fit for foul play—or at least, that was how it went in fiction.

Two men sat at a table as drunkards livened up the bar around them. They were positioned face-to-face along a wall, each enjoying a drink and some snacks like any other customer.

The pair looked almost to belong in those seats. The one sitting closer to the entrance—and therefore in a lower social position—was an entirely average mensch wearing clothes that were a bit frayed, but not shabby enough to call rags. His company looked to be more of a gentleman, with clothes that had been tailored to his size.

If one were to note any peculiarities about the two, then perhaps the only detail that would arise would be that the second man was a vampire: few of his kind inhabited the lower classes of Rhine. Yet many noble immortals in the annals of history had lost their privileges or cast them away, and a common vampire was barely worth mentioning in a large imperial city.

Had a certain blond boy been present, he would have likened the odds to seeing an Eastern European person in a major metropolitan train station. The man's long fangs and blood-red eyes were enough for passersby to think to themselves, *Huh*, but nothing more.

"Gods, it sure sounds like that last trip was a tough one."

"Y-Yes, well... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause you any trouble..."

Their conversation, like them, seemed ordinary. That the mensch shrunk away in a nervous sweat was as normal as the vampire acting in a deliberately good-natured fashion; to anyone around them, they were merchants sharing a drink after putting a job behind them.

Indeed, one would have to be truly ill of mind to suspect anything in their exchange. Say, for example, that someone from the next table over had excused themselves, leaving only one person with nothing to do but eavesdrop; even then, the bored listener surely would have found nothing of interest to pay attention to in the pair's everyday discussion.

Yet in truth, theirs was a conversation overflowing with evil.

“Oh, no, it was hardly any trouble at all. That said, while I understand wanting to take responsibility for your own matters, when the losses are so heavy... Well.”

“I-I’m terribly sorry, sir. I’d figured that it wouldn’t be right to bother you with all the trouble of—”

“When things go so wrong that we’ve failed both the client *and* the shipping company, it’d be poor manners if I *didn’t* step in to speak on our behalf. Please, if this happens again, don’t be afraid to report your mistakes.”

On the surface, the back-and-forth was that of a senior merchant bullying a junior merchandise-stocker over drinks; beneath the facade, though, was a far more malicious business. Who could possibly guess that these two were part of an organization unfit to operate in the light of day?

The trick to crime was, in truth, to never appear criminal in the first place. Those ignorant to their dealings reported nothing—carrying secrets posed little danger if nobody bothered to check the pockets they were stored in. Banality was their daily disguise, and those who managed gangs of petty thugs knew that looking anything but the part was the first priority in their line of work.

“The losses were substantial, after all,” the vampire went on. “It pained me to see, as the one keeping our accounts. From now on, I’ll be overseeing this matter personally.”

“Um... Y-Yes, sir. I... I understand.”

The underling wriggled in his chair as he attempted to hide his fears from the zero people bothering to pay him any mind. He felt his back dampen with beads of sweat; blood beaded in little half-moons across his palms as his fists balled and his nails bit deep.

The shame of failure was *that* unbearable.

Reputation in the underworld was worth as much as in noble spheres: to be underestimated was a matter of literal life and death. At best, one could hope to be used up and stripped to the bone; at worst, they would be a plaything until their corpse suddenly appeared in a forgotten gutter.

Whereas aristocrats did not engage in senseless violence—save for those who

had particularly unsavory hobbies—the same could not be said for the denizens of the shadows. Moving up the social ladder was easier here, and one misstep could be all it took to turn the world against someone: any who stumbled would find themselves begging for mercy at the feet of yesterday's lackeys.

Not only had the man failed, but he'd tried to cover for his own mistakes and failed *again*—his situation was dire. It didn't help that the news had been spilled to his superior by one of his disgruntled men trying to get back at him for sullying *their* reputation. Fessing up on his own after making up for a slip-up could have been settled with a fist to the face and no more; but how could he possibly atone now?

Whatever awaited, it was too terrible for him to dare imagining.

"That said, I'm sure our client won't be very pleased to hear from me, considering all that's happened."

"Uh... I guess not."

"But come to think of it, our new customer has relations with other merchants, don't they?" Though the vampire neatly packaged his words in the guise of business-talk, they were thinly veiled threats; he knew the truth, and he enjoyed hinting at that fact to his hapless subordinate. "Then perhaps we should introduce them to a new deal. I'm sure talks will be much smoother once we've earned back some trust with a job well done."

"A-Are you sure? Can we really let that stuck—ahem. I mean, shouldn't we win that trust back ourselves?"

"All that matters in business is the final result. Remember that."

Free from the bondage of ethics, the criminal world was one where swords could be shields and odd numbers could turn even—so long as the circumstances lined up. They could pick and choose how to resolve the situation.

Unlike the government, they didn't care to take credit for the hanging of their enemies. All they needed was for their foe to draw someone's ire and end up floating down the sewers—the gossipmongers would do the rest.

"Well then, let's pass along some work."

The job was simple. A mere spark was enough to set off the excitable fools they were dealing with—all the more true when the embers of discord were already glowing. They didn't even need to provide a flame; it would suffice to add a bit of fuel to the smoldering logs already present.

Alas, the men had forgotten something.

Their threats could ignite conflict, but a roaring flame could not be contained by human hands alone. Many knew this simple truth, but were quick to forget it until the fires they'd started began to burn at their own heels.

[Tips] Many people treat adventuring as a part-time job to tide them over during the off-seasons for their main occupation.

The rot of wood exposed to moisture; mud constantly stirred without a moment to dry; rankness radiating off of unbathed paupers; unclean waste dumped at random—frankly speaking, the air hanging over this collection of tents beyond Marsheim's walls was enough to kill a genteel girl with one breath.

Be this the ends of all earth as it may, Marsheim was still the capital of an imperial administrative state; rent was not cheap. No matter how disorderly the city got, the Empire's most remote lookout would always be home to a powerful margrave.

From my research, the cheapest inns—offering quality fit for the prices—still charged a libra per month for a bed in their commons. While one silver was small change to most, some could hardly be asked to part with it. Putting the bare minimum of food in one's mouth was always the foremost priority, and rent was one of the first expenses to be cut to that end, second only to perhaps clothing.

This flock of tents was home to migrants, vagabonds, and failed entrepreneurs. Those who lacked the money to stay inside the city but had nothing else to cling to came here as a last resort.

As a collection of squatters lacked access to public services, the packed, congested landscape was home to conditions horrible beyond words. It was

difficult to say whether the people here were dressed in clothes or scraps, and many were so awfully filthy that it was hard to tell their gender—for some, I couldn't even guess at their species. Forget bathing, these people must not have seen running water in years. I could hardly believe my eyes with my Berylinian sensibilities.

Of course, the capital of vanity was carefully manicured to prune off slums to the point that an unbathed citizen would be considered no citizen at all. Comparing this remote region to that was a mistake to begin with.

Even so, I couldn't wrap my head around why the local authorities permitted this lawless wasteland to sit right by its walls. This went for the neglected districts within city limits as well, but I couldn't help but feel that this posed a massive security risk. While I acknowledged that I knew nothing of the margrave's financial situation, I would have razed this place to the ground long ago, had I been in the seat of power. My inner El Presidente told me that the slums were a breeding ground for crime, and draconian taxes were a price worth paying to stamp them out in favor of real housing.

I continued pondering what could possibly be keeping this place afloat as Margit and I wandered around the tent grounds, as the locals called it.

"No luck, huh?"

"No luck indeed."

But, as luck would have it, all we had to show for half a day's walking was sweat and a noxious odor clinging to our clothes.

"I guess we really weren't dressed the part."

"Perhaps we should have scoured the Trash Heap for some tattered rags."

We'd gone around asking the people here if they knew anything about the Exilrat with the vague hope that we might even run into its members, but they weren't exactly taking visitors. Knowing that we couldn't wait for them at the Association building because they didn't have any identifying marks, we'd hoped that touring their stamping grounds would lead to a confrontation eventually—unfortunately, that had been a bust.

At this point, coming all the way out had just been a waste of time. We

would've been better off loitering in town and catching one of the pickpockets as they came my way.

"So we're going to need disguises... This isn't really my specialty."

"That makes two of us. Preparing camouflage for the forest is one thing, but blending into a city is completely foreign to me."

I could see why a favorite game of mine had so clearly delineated between rangers and scouts: for as unbeatable and acute as the master huntress was in her element, Margit remained a country bumpkin who was only just beginning to learn how to get along in the big city.

Naturally, that went for me too. My stint of servitude had been spent under the assumption that any enemy would come to me as opposed to the other way around; I didn't know the first thing about *searching* for people. I was confident I could sniff out ill intent if it ever came my way, but proactively tracking a target down was not my forte.

I'd tried the tricks I'd used for tabletop campaigns, but it hadn't worked as well as I'd hoped. My guess that the destitute would respond better to goods than to money had been spot on, but I'd underestimated the depravity of this land. We'd encountered beggars who'd told us they had the intel we needed, but after giving them food, they'd inhaled our payment whole and tried to bolt off. When we'd hunted them down and threatened them with a light walloping, the scamps had the gall to cough up that they hadn't known anything to begin with.

Worse still, those who saw we had stuff on us had flocked around, and the crowd had brought thoughtless hands reaching for our pockets—that was no environment to conduct an investigation. Skills involving shady exchanges usually ended up gathering dust, but now I could see their true value.

The most important thing in asking questions was finding the right person to field them with. This was the Exilrat's home turf, yes, but *obviously* not everyone here would know about their dealings. I missed the convenience of starting every campaign with a group of three-to-five adventurers from every walk of life. Most of the time, the party would have one orphan or former gangster or the like who could bear the burden of shantytown dealings—if the

GM was feeling up to it, they'd even know a guy in the area.

"But I really don't want to roll around in filth on purpose," I sighed. "Would it even be worth it anyway?"

"Surely we could simply wash ourselves off after the fact."

"Public bathhouses in the city will turn you away if you're *too* filthy, and throwing a bit of dirt on ourselves isn't going to cut it if we want to look the part."

Claiming to be an unemployed vagrant with a long, straight head of hair was a bit of a stretch, and cutting it was sure to bring a fey protest with it. Even if I stuffed my fingernails with dirt and put on some smelly rags, the luster of daily scalp care wasn't going to fade in a day.

The same went for our skin. Both of us placed emphasis on regular hygiene, and those with keen eyes would see through any surface layer of grime we applied. Maybe there was such a thing as being too clean.

"It looks like we'll have to go with Plan B."

"I agree. Or rather, I don't see any other option for us at this point."

Wanting to avoid a confused discussion on-site, we'd already hashed out our fallback plan.

This was enemy territory, after all. We'd known from the start that aimlessly walking around might not yield anything: it was only natural for their members to restrict the flow of information amongst their own people.

To begin with, our initial strategy required a great deal of luck. We'd simply been hoping for the improbable event that we'd run into a loose-lipped member or someone feeling cast aside by the group; an expected failure wasn't enough to deter us.

Quite the contrary: our asking around was simply *bait* for the more likely phase of our plan. As nice as it would've been to do things peacefully, we adventurers were always quick to resort to violence if it opened up the quickest path forward.

"I'll take the ones in front. I count...six?"

“So close. One of the ones ahead isn’t part of their group—so five. Leave the two behind us to me.”

“Gotcha. Let’s make it quick.”

After a short chat, the two of us made our moves.

I leapt forward, kicking a tent down whole as I aimed for the shadow inside; Margit crouched low and sprinted off, vanishing from my field of view.

The unarmed bonuses from Hybrid Sword Arts were my only boost to my martial arts, but while I wasn’t going to wow any master practitioners, the violence of fixed values spoke for itself. I’d have to face a truly inhuman opponent to be challenged now.

My upward roundhouse slammed straight into the figure hiding behind the tattered tarp. I could feel the brutal sensation of the tip of my foot sinking into flesh and then snapping something hard; the visceral tactile feedback sent satisfied signals to my brain.

That was a clean hit—a crit, even.

“Haugh!”

A pained gasp followed my foot as I pulled it back, and the person collapsed backward, tearing the tent down with them.

Oh? You’re not as filthy as I would’ve thought. But if you’re not the owner of this tent, then who are you?

“You little shit!”

Ah well, who cares. These weren’t neutral observers: they’d surrounded us with clearly nefarious intentions. Our line had gotten a bite, and it was only fair that we scoop up our catch to see what we’d fished up.

Rapidly retracting my leg, I closed the distance with another foe who was shocked into stillness that their ambush had gone awry. He was a stout mensch man sporting a bald head and surprisingly decent clothes. Close shaves were popular with soldiers and adventurers alike for being easy to do and keep clean, but this man was much too boorish to be a public servant; I had no reason to hold back as I jammed my elbow into his solar plexus.

I wove my fingers together to put the whole of my weight behind the strike. Every bit of my momentum was concentrated into the hardest point in my whole body.

“Groooah?!”

I ended up boring him out from below due to the disparity in our heights, and he let out an indescribably guttural scream. The impact reverberated through my arms, and I could feel something squishy crumple behind his outer muscles —this, too, was a clean strike.

“Whoa, now.”

The timbre of his gurgling gave me a bad feeling, so I stepped aside. Not a moment later was I followed by a disgusting shower: he buckled over, folding in half at the point of contact and puking out his guts along the way.

“Ah... Ahhh!”

And the last one tried to *run*! Evidently, seeing his two comrades beaten down in the blink of an eye had proven too much.

What a heartless fellow. I plucked a knife off the back of the hurling man and twirled it a few times in my hand. Once I had the weight down, I held it by the blade and prepared to throw.

At this distance, I was, say...three and a quarter revolutions away? I tossed the dagger with a slapdash guesstimate and it spun through the air, eventually claiming the runaway’s hamstring as its new sheath.

Wait, shoot... Considering the spot I hit him in, I might’ve completely severed a major ligament. I’d meant to avoid leaving any irreversible wounds, but... Well, I supposed this was what I got for getting lazy.

As I scratched the back of my head over my oopsie, horrific noises rang out behind me, followed shortly after by screaming. Looking over my shoulder, I saw two more men planted face down in the dirt.

“Goodness, people with only one pair of eyes are so simple to deal with.”

Naturally, Margit had been the one to place them there. She’d probably jumped from a nearby shack’s roof—I was impressed she’d managed to climb

any of them without collapsing it—and leapt onto them from above like a hooded assassin. Her poor victims were stuck sharing a passionate kiss with the ground.

Not only had she landed an aerial assassination, but it was a double kill at that—big points. Clearly, our ambushers hadn't expected to be attacked from behind when they'd supposedly surrounded us; they'd hit the earth without breaking their falls in the slightest. That had to hurt: even without wrist-blades, this could definitely have been a lethal blow if she hadn't held back.

As with any good assassin build, Margit had landed her surprise attack out of stealth. I'd always been skeptical about using a minor action to enter the state, but it was blatantly unfair when paired with a racial bonus that applied it during setup.

"Boy, you're brutal... You probably broke all their front teeth."

"Please, Erich. *Yours* is going to bleed out if you don't tend to the wound soon."

In one quick round, we'd reduced five men to groaning props. The uninvolved parties nearby frantically scuttled off, not wanting to be wrapped up in the fighting.

One was wrapped in a fallen tent with a few broken ribs; another had coughed up everything in his guts and balled up. The other three were flat on the ground, sullying the dirt with blood: the man I'd daggered down kept trying and failing to remove the weapon—he was best off not touching the thing—and the other two were struggling to breathe through their broken noses.

Though it pained me to beat down people I didn't even know, they must've understood it was only fair considering their own intentions.

"It's not like he'll die on the spot—he'll be fine. More importantly, how about we introduce ourselves to our new friends?"

We'd caused a scene, and we were going to get something out of it. To that end, we were going to drag one of these lowlives—whoever seemed like they could actually talk—to an empty tent for a little ice-breaker.

Greetings were very important, after all. Now that we'd gotten the pre-

greeting ambush out of the way, it would be horribly rude of us not to say hello.

I grabbed the man dribbling bile by the dome and forced him to look up to meet my grin. Remember, a good introduction is the first step to any relationship, and a good smile is the foundation of trust.

“Hey there, pal. What do you say we go have a little chat?”

[Tips] The tent grounds are a slum populated by all sorts of poor travelers trying to make Marsheim home. Estimates figure that over one thousand people cling to the outer walls of the city.

The local government tolerates it only because displacement could drive the denizens past the brink of desperation and cause pandemonium. Still, the unregulated nature of the area has led to it becoming a hotbed of criminal activity anyway.

Adventurers were well-known for their seamless transitions between interrogation and torture, but the latter wasn’t necessary if one had other means. The silver-tongued needed only to run verbal circles around their captive; the rich could simply whack them with a sack full of coins; mind-reading mages could bypass everything with a spell.

Some liked to take advantage of the flexibility an analog god of fate offered. Even lacking the most basic Sociability skills, a PC could always attempt a more physical approach: brandishing a tightened fist and threatening to force it into uninvited places could count as a negotiation attempt, so long as the GM approved.

In other words, it all came down to the interrogator’s ingenuity. The sole goal was to extract information, and everything else was a means to that end.

In my case, a face-to-face confrontation enabled me to use my Overwhelming Smile, which let my mastery in Hybrid Sword Arts determine how Intimidating I was. Violence was wholly unnecessary to bully a lowly goon into cooperating—especially a goon who’d just experienced my might firsthand.

“I-I won’t snitch! You don’t understand what’d happen to me if I did!”

We'd dragged the man down a small, isolated road. At first, he seemed reluctant to cough up anything more than the contents of his stomach, but he became a lot easier to work with once I told him to choose between betting on his comrades' goodwill or mine while brandishing the fey karambit.

Seeing him break in a shamelessly pragmatic display of self-interest was rather pleasant—refreshing, even. It was so very easy to work with someone who valued the forgettable token that was his own life.

Had he known something of loyalty or had a cause to fight for, this would have been so much more painful. I'd run into many of those sorts while working for Lady Agrippina, and they had been unforgettable chores to break: neither nail nor tooth sufficed to get the gums flapping, and beating them with sacks of gold did little more than cave in their skulls. I wouldn't be surprised if people like them could witness their family's heads lined up on a table while their newborn was put to the blade and *still* retain their silence—that was how alien they'd felt.

In comparison, a pragmatic and selfish captive was a walk in the park. The fear of losing one's life or fortune was enough to deprive them of most of their long-term thinking.

Boy, what a stroke of luck. While I wasn't all that opposed to more gruesome methods, I didn't *want* to resort to them. If I could get away without playing dentist or helping others appreciate the beauty of fresh air, I was all for it.

I mean, yes, I *had* done those things when it'd been my literal job, but I hadn't slept well after the fact. Screams and desperate pleading were terrible for the psyche, even when they came from one's mortal enemies.

"I-I don't know nothing! A-All I know is I got a bit of cash to scare you—just to rough you up a bit!"

His response was as trite as they came. It was hard not to feel offended at how hard I'd been looked down upon, but adventuring was a crass field in which it was my own damn fault for *looking* like I could be taken in a fight. All I could do was make sure the idiots who tried to capitalize would never so much as look in my direction again.

"Yes, yes, that's lovely," I said. "It sounds like both your life and mine go for

cheap, hanging in balance with only some spare change on the other side. But what I really want to know is *who* placed those coins on the scale."

"Th-The Heilbronn Familie! I'm a Heilbronn member! And we'll still call it even if you let me go now, but if you don't—"

"But will this impressive clan of yours be able to tell that you're you when they find a faceless corpse floating down the sewers? I don't mean to scare you, but I have *plenty* of ways to make it so that not even your own mother would recognize you."

I figured it wouldn't hurt to spook him a little. Margit made a face that had, *What did they teach this boy in the capital?* written all over it, but I'd excuse myself later. Dropping the act now would cause all the fear I'd carefully built up to dissipate.

As an aside, I'd just been throwing out threats, but that particular one hadn't been empty. Sealing his mouth might save me some trouble if the alternative was having him go home to report more than I wanted him to. Between dealing with a handful of chumps and taking on a crime syndicate feared throughout the region, I would prefer to engage in unauthorized waste disposal any day.

Still, tossing five people into a river or sneaking them to the slimes really would hang heavy on my mental health. I'd appreciate it if he just worked with me.

"O-Okay, I'll talk—I'll *talk!* Gods, just don't kill me!"

"Attaboy. And? Who's got the money?"

Thankfully, my combo of skills worked its magic and caused the man to further soil himself, though not with vomit this time. It seemed my slender face didn't have any adverse effects in this regard: I'd successfully intimidated a hulking man into spilling the beans without reserve.

"It's those Baldur crooks! I got the money from some shady weirdos in robes that stank of dope—it's gotta be them! They came knocking at ours and told us they had a cocky kid they wanted us to toss around!"

Hm? I knew that the Baldur Clan had their eyes on me, and it seemed reasonable enough that they'd make an attempt on my life...but would they

outsource something like that? And not to some Heilbronn officer, but to this random goon who looked like he could hardly handle himself in a bar fight.

This was a group that shamelessly walked the streets despite the believable rumors of illicit narcotics that floated around them. If they actually wanted to get someone out of their hair, surely they had someone in-house to deal with it. Would they really be so sloppy? Maybe it was plausible for a smaller operation, but I was doubtful that the rulers of a drug empire would stoop so low.

For the answer to one mystery to lead into the next was a staple of TRPG writing, but I couldn't shake off my suspicions.

This had to be one of those moments where the GM refused to voice an NPC's words in definite terms. I could hear the world adding "he *claims*" and "he seems to *believe*" on top of the bald man's statements; the character might consider this the truth, but whether that was the truth of the setting was an entirely separate matter.

The stewing spiral in my brain made me nostalgic for the whodunnits and urban mysteries I'd played through long ago—especially in the worlds of cosmic horrors and that scheming sword. Expert psychoanalysis and the Sense Lies spell could only ever tell if the *target* thought what they were saying was true; uncovering if they knew what they were talking about was left as an exercise for the players. I closed my eyes, only to see the GM's shit-eating grin burned into the back of my eyelids.

We'd gained a lead, but one of dubious quality. The pants-wetting fear on display told me that this man was either telling the truth or destined for a career in the capital's theaters—I felt it was safe to assume the former.

But it was just that...leads this obvious *never* amounted to anything.

If only this had been my old muscle-headed table, surgically modified to fit more muscle per skull than there was space, we would have gone around wreaking havoc under the assumption that "If we beat the crap out of everyone, we'll get the mastermind eventually too!" That way, all we would have to do to avoid all the convoluted games of intrigue would be to slaughter anyone even slightly suspicious.

But while I cherished the memories of using Lord Mace to "bridge the gap" for

any and every verbal disagreement, I couldn't exactly pull that off here when I was just getting my footing as an adventurer.

"Hmm... What to do..."

"Ack?!"

I looped around to choke the man out while cocking my head to think about more important things. Letting him live was perfectly fine: it'd help to have him spread the word that we were bad news if trifled with. But more pertinently...

"This is really suspicious, huh?"

"Is it?" Margit asked. "I'm afraid I'm not as well versed in urban affairs. Though, now that you mention it, this does seem rather clumsy for a supposedly powerful clan."

At the end of the day, all we'd gotten was one lead of dubious value. I couldn't think of any slip-ups on my part that would've made a GM snarkily comment on how my interrogation skills needed brushing up, so the man probably hadn't known all that much to begin with. Still, it was hard to decide what to do with this intel.

The lead was as blunt as having a fat middle-aged noble for a villain. Nowadays, no one would ever—oh, wait. Actually, come to think of it, Viscount Liplar had fit the bill perfectly.

Okay, barring *one* exception, but the point still stood: it would probably be better to withhold judgment. While I did want to get this whole affair over with, it was still too early to seek an answer in the raw, abrupt and terribly permanent form of a STR check.

Gathering more information wouldn't hurt. It wasn't like we could just go to the kingpin's office and ask, "Excuse me, but would you happen to be trying to murder us?" and expect a straight response anyway.

"Pretty much nothing gained today," I sighed. "All that sweat for nothing."

"Not only the sweat," Margit added, "but this hideous odor on our clothes."

Our confrontation with the Exilrat had been a bust, and our only lead was anything but reliable. I'd been ready to raise my fists if need be, but at this

point, I was just confused: who was I to bring them down upon?

[Tips] Equating affiliation with agreement is the most dangerous of assumptions. For one may see a mark of membership and lash out in a fit of temper, only to find themselves with many, many unnecessary enemies.

As badly as I wanted to settle the score, wandering around town every day to bait out another attack was inefficient.

We'd decided instead to see how things played out for now and focus on looking for new leads in the meantime...but that wasn't going so well. You could even say we'd hit a dead end.

We'd gone to the guards with a little gift of thanks, so to speak, for their work in saving Margit. Along with my gratitude, I'd mentioned that I wanted to speak to the person who'd tried to lay a hand on my partner, but the officer on duty had averted his eyes and looked sorry as he broke the news.

The crime was light, so he'd been released.

The two of us had been stunned into silence.

The Empire's penal code was tightly under wraps: we commoners knew nothing of it, and I hadn't even seen the official rules as a member of the madam's entourage. But while I didn't know the specifics, attempted kidnapping could *not* be a misdemeanor. If stealing a person was a "light" crime, then why in the world would the crown bother with outlawing slavery?

Unfortunately, we were up against real authorities this time. Mere adventurers like us couldn't expect to receive anything substantive just for our persistence, and bringing out the Ubiorum ring here would just bring more unwanted attention. I didn't even want to think about what kind of hateful correspondence I'd receive if rumor got out that *the* count thaumapalatine was up to something in Ende Erde.

The seal was a wild card, through and through—I would *not* use it unless I absolutely had to. Pulling it out while we still had other options on the table would bring more side effects than cures; as such, we'd withdrawn from the jail

without causing a fuss.

Damn. I'd thought that the city guards would need a few days to file away their paperwork and had deliberately decided to wait a few days; that had backfired spectacularly. Never had I imagined that our enemy had ears so quick to pick up rumors or tendrils so long to grease official palms.

Wasn't this all a bit much for what was essentially a gang of adventurers? Any other would-be kidnapper caught in city limits wouldn't have been released on the highest bail. Even someone with highborn connections would have remained stuck if their master didn't have an in with the noble overseeing the guards who'd arrested them.

I wasn't expecting Berylinian levels of strictness, but what had the world come to for an apprehended criminal to walk free without serving any time?

...Wait a second. There was also the possibility that he had only been "let free" on the surface; maybe he'd been taken care of to tie up loose ends. If someone wanted him to keep a secret, it would be easiest for them if his mouth never opened again.

How could I have forgotten when I'd threatened to do the same? A chunk of flesh floating downstream would be impossible to identify even if we happened to see it.

"Goodness, I'm at a loss."

"Honestly."

"On another note, what about this one?"

"Mm... Meh."

Yet in spite of wanting to know the truth, it wouldn't be worth it to break into the guards' barracks—on to Plan C we went. Margit could easily sneak in, I'm sure, but government property was government property, even on the frontier. If they had some sort of mystic surveillance system, it would all be over: there wasn't any point in going through all this trouble to avoid criminal violence if we ended up being criminals in a different way anyway, so we agreed to play it safe.

“Is that so? I think it smells rather nice.”

“It’s too viscous. Something’s been mixed in.”

Instead, we were walking around Marsheim and perusing the wares at every stall dealing in arcane goods.

The Baldur Clan used these businesses as fronts to push narcotics. If they truly were planning on either recruiting or eliminating me, then hitting up every store offering dubious potions was a sure way of getting them to act.

“Excuse me, young man. If you’re not looking to buy, can I ask that you take yourself elsewhere?”

“But mister,” I answered, “I can’t overlook these wares. You really should put in a complaint with the mage you order these from. I mean, this skincare ointment could potentially *harm* someone’s skin.”

Rare as they were, mystic potions did circulate through open markets—though, as one might expect, the quality control was all over the place. Mages did not have the same respect for their craft as magia, nor did they have the same overseeing body. This was about as bad as letting doctors self-certify, and led to some genuinely awful products hitting shelves.

The talented mages were those who understood the potential dangers their pharmaceuticals posed, and who thus concocted their solutions to order. Those less savvy were liable to flood the market with mass-made junk, figuring that no one would care about receiving mediocre salves and drinkables—these were almost invariably worthless.

Sadly, the grift was impossible to spot without specialized knowledge, and that was hard to come by in the borderlands. I’d popped open the lid to a so-called “skincare ointment” only to find a mixture so dubious that I hesitated to test it on the back of my palm; letting it ruin my partner’s springy skin was out of the question. Despite its pleasant smell—carefully designed to trick laypeople—it did not work as advertised. In fact, the overinclusion of perfumes could ironically trigger a rash.

To begin with, had a mage *really* made this thing? While the aromatic herbs were admittedly kind on the nose, I could pick up notes of plants that should

not be anywhere near a person's body. Having worked all those gathering requests at the College, I knew my stuff when it came to greens.

"You think I'm running this shop 'cause I want advice, kid?"

Alas, my sincere warning had fallen on deaf ears. The shopkeeper's brow twitched in anger.

"No, but I suspect any lady who buys one of these won't be coming back."

"Shut up! If anyone's driving business away, it's *you!* Now scram!"

The man shooed us off with his hands as one does a puppy, so I shrugged, returned the potion to its place, and got up. Regardless of whether he knew it was a fake or not, there was no point in arguing if he didn't care to run an honest business.

"Boy, it sure is hard to find anything above board."

"Truly. I'm glad to have someone with a discerning eye with me—though I have to say, it won't be easy to show my face around that street again anytime soon."

We spent half a day heckling various open-air stalls. Just as I grew totally disillusioned with how unscrupulous these snake-oil salesmen were, our cast line finally twitched.

Figuring that we could look for one last place to browse, we were headed toward another large market street. Small unnamed paths snaked through the city like an ant colony, and we were cutting through one such alleyway when a faint bloodlust lapped at my back.

Margit had sensed it too: she tugged gently on my sleeve, and her nimble legs were faintly bent and ready to pounce.

"According to plan," I whispered.

"Yes, I know."

"Oh, and—"

"I *know*," she giggled.

Her dependable laughter was followed by a countdown from three. As the

more perceptive one, Margit was tracking the enemy for the both of us.

The word “zero” came out of her mouth with an infinitesimal fleck of spit—this wasn’t some metaphor: as my mind shifted for impending combat, my Lightning Reflexes let me take in every detail in the frozen world around me.

What had begun as a nonchalant step turned into the kickoff of a full-speed sprint as I closed in on the figures lying in wait beyond the alley’s mouth.

“Heya,” I said.

“Wha—huh?!”

Anyone trying to jump an unsuspecting foe was almost always not on full alert themselves, and nothing could be easier than dealing with them once the tables were turned. Even an experienced party could risk half-wiping off a failed reaction, and any more bad luck was more than enough to cause total annihilation.

I could hardly believe this was already the second time this had happened since coming here; thank goodness I had Margit with me. The really incompetent ones aside, I’d surely have walked into an ambush at some point.

Around the corner, I was met with a man in a shady robe flanked by what seemed to be two bodyguards—he must have been a mage.

In which case, I needed to neutralize him before he could cast anything scary. I grabbed him by the face and slammed the back of his head straight into the nearest wall.

“Grah?!”

The gratifying sensation of bone yielding to crushing force zipped through my arm as a spurt from the mage’s nose dyed my sleeve red. His eyes peeked through my fingers at unaligned angles, confirming that his consciousness had clocked out to go on holiday.

Now *this* was how you dealt with a mage. The great limitation of magic was that it couldn’t act on anything beyond the caster’s awareness. It was best to leave them unaware of everything before they could duck out of sight and start meddling from the shadows.

Though the strategy wasn't quite as simple when running up against someone with a perennial barrier or retaliatory hex, they were still usually immutable and standardized enough to break through. Setting aside things like Lady Agrippina's monstrous automatic counterattack spell, most defensive magic would fail to trigger so long as the caster was knocked out before their effects could activate.

It hadn't felt like I'd shattered a force field, so it didn't look like we were up against anyone special...or so I thought.

"Whoa."

I slammed my eyes shut and put a hand over my mouth; fractions of a moment later, I heard something snap. The mage must've channeled his mana into a palmed catalyst before I could bash in his head. He'd been ready to cast, but lost control upon being knocked out, causing the spell to violently burst.

"Ack! Gah!"

"What the—agh! Arck, hngh!"

The bodyguard's screams followed me as I leapt backward to get out of the danger zone and waved at the air. Upon opening my eyes, I found the men encircled by a haze, scratching at their eyes and necks. The unconscious mage was frothing at the mouth too; he must've summoned some kind of tear gas cloud.

Holy shit, that's horrifying. I may have used horseradish for similar purposes once, but the mystic version was on a completely different level. By starting with a potent irritant for a catalyst and tweaking it with mutative magic, the mage had amplified its effects and controlled its reach.

Judging from how the fumes refused to venture beyond a certain point, they were probably bound to a fixed radius—he may even have been able to lock onto a target. An overflow of mana had made it backfire, leaving only the powerful blinding effect.

Poor them, I thought, but was interrupted by a piercing shriek from above.

"Aaaaaaa*aaahhhhh*!"

A robed woman came raining down from above and landed with a noise

somewhere between a *splat* and a *crunch*.

This was my first “Boss! A girl came falling from the sky!” moment in years—speaking of, I wonder how Miss Celia was doing—but unfortunately, this time around had too much red in its color scheme to put me in the mood for heroics.

Her scream had dopplered as she’d approached; she’d fallen from considerably higher up than the rooftops, and at tremendous speeds. Once she’d gone from flying to falling, inertia and potential energy had done the rest. Unable to slow her descent, she’d planted her face straight into the unpaved street.

“My, you’re as quick as ever.”

“Same to you.”

Clung to the woman’s back, Margit looked up at me with an unaffected expression. Her hands were still tightly wound around her mark’s neck from her initial greeting. She continued to squeeze the flow of oxygen shut, just in case—a terrifying thought, considering arachne could draw ridiculous bows that would make grown mensch men buckle. The brain was where every mage began their spells, and even the most perfectly automated formulae could not churn on without its functions.

I’d spotted Margit scurrying up the wall just as I’d bolted forward, so she must’ve jumped from there onto the airborne mage to spring a surprise attack from below. Living up to the jumping spider name, I supposed.

“Ah, no wonder they knew to set up in such a good spot. She must’ve been keeping watch from above.”

“Along with one of those magical devices that throws one’s voice, I’m sure.”

“Huh.” I thought for a moment. “Flying is supposed to be one of the hardest things a mage can do. I wonder why she’s running around as somebody’s gofer.”

“Everyone has their own business, you know.”

Squeezed and squeezed until the very last drops of consciousness faded, the poor mage was a practitioner of an art few magia could claim to have mastered.

To phantasmal creatures it was their birthright, but flight magic was a lofty peak for us mortals.

As much as I wanted to joke about how it was clearly because it would ruin too many campaigns from the word go, the truth was that every step of the process from generating lift to resisting gravity involved complex webs of stacking spells to make work. Even those with the mana pools to fuel such endeavors usually ran up against walls only cleared by raw talent.

Put in a more tangible way, there was no single Flight Magic spell that would let the caster freely navigate in three dimensions.

One had to finely tune spells to get off the ground *without* misaligning their position with the planet below, all while protecting themselves from the wind and anything else that might impede their movement. It was like trying to ride a bicycle while playing the harmonica, solving a Rubik's cube in one hand, and untangling a ring puzzle in the other—no wonder there were so few mages who could fly.

That this singular feat was enough to earn the bombastic title of ornithurge and receive a mind-boggling salary—in exchange for being run ragged across the Empire at all times, to be fair—made it all the more difficult to comprehend what this woman was doing out here. I literally could not understand. Even if she'd lacked the brains to graduate as a magus, there was sure to be a place for her with the imperial mage corps.

"Lemme see... Aha, that settles it."

With Margit pinning her down, I poked around in her pockets for a clear marker of identity. Her amber-orange adventurer's tag was hung around her neck on the same rope as another accessory: an emblem depicting a crow with an eyeball in its mouth.

I'd heard of this symbol while learning about the clans: it was the Baldur Clan's insignia. Like nobles, clans had a habit of branding themselves with a crest, tattooing it on their members to strengthen solidarity or raising flags on friendly shopfronts to section off their own turf.

To have such a definite article pointed to the flying witch's role as an officer in the organization.

I kept digging in hopes of finding anything else, and also to make sure she was totally disarmed, only to stumble upon a handful of peculiar packets. They were oiled papers designed to keep the powders within from drying, and each had enough mystic power to tell they were some kind of alchemic compound at a glance.

This is potent stuff. I raised it up to the sunlight, and the faint blue of the powder came filtering through.

"Ohhh. So they're *literally* high on their own supply. I knew they were sketchy, but I didn't think it'd be this bad."

Looking more closely, I noticed that our attackers' complexion was awful—even accounting for the beatdown. The woman Margit had pounced on had pitch black bags under her eyes that contrasted sharply with the papery white of her skin; the seizing bodyguards had a noticeable case of jaundice, and the white-eyed mage was totally yellow in the face. If they were having liver issues, then that was all the more reason to suspect some form of substance abuse.

If I recalled correctly, it was opium that placed great strain on the kidney and liver. Poppies had been used since ancient times for their thaumaturgic properties, but they were also a tightly restricted substance in the Trialist Empire on account of their recreational uses. Even at the College, one had to become a researcher before handling the plant.

The delicacy of the ingredient was amplified by the possibility of compounding error: if an alchemist accidentally got high due to mishandling, they were liable to make even more mistakes while not right of mind. I'd heard that substandard mages would struggle to form any kind of stable compound using poppies.

"This has to be something bad, right?"

"Don't you dare open that packet, even by mistake."

"Don't worry, I know."

If the powder scattered and got into our lungs, we'd be in real trouble. Margit was especially vulnerable on account of her small size making any dose relatively more potent; even a small amount could cause severe effects.

Now that we had a cartel serious about chasing us, we needed to get intel out of these guys *fast*—even if that meant resorting to some less-than-gentle means. I refused to live a life where I had to carefully watch where I *breathed*, let alone worrying whether my next meal in public would be poisoned. The mage I'd incapacitated had summoned tear gas; surely they were capable of doing the same with toxins.

If the airborne pathogen was odorless and unstimulating, I would struggle to detect it. At the bare minimum, this would come to a question of their life or mine the moment the enemy decided that no method was off the table.

That meant the key was to get a singular message across: "Oh. I can't pick a fight with him."

One was always sure to consider the possibility of failure when ridding oneself of a nuisance. If the price of a mistake or two was trivial, then their hand would reach for their weapon without reserve.

But if the opponent were a true threat, capable of ensuring their demise if they missed their chance...the grip on their blade would loosen.

So now that things had shaped out this way, I only had one path forward. They needed to know that I was plainly not to be fucked with.

[Tips] While it is the pinnacle of difficulty to achieve self-sustaining mystic flight, group efforts to surmount those challenges alongside technological advancements have given rise to the aeroship.

For all my griping about the lawlessness of this unkempt frontier, it sure was nice when *we* were the ones taking advantage.

Despite having my face fully concealed by the most blatantly shady hood ever, a little extra cash had been all it took to borrow a secluded room with suspiciously human-sized wriggling sacks in tow. The innkeeper hadn't even batted an eye.

"Wooow," I said. "A bit old, but that's a grand sight."

"A stately mansion indeed," Margit said. "How many hundreds does one need to kill to afford a home like this?"

"None. The trick is to slowly suck the life out of *thousands* until they run dry."

"Why thank you for the unpleasant image."

And, no matter how hard a person kicked or screamed, no one would ever come to check on them so long as they weren't making enough noise to bother the other guests—easily handled by a deafening spell. Honestly, the experience just drove home why cartels were so careful to keep their members off their own product...

"Well, don't worry about it. Everyone knows a palace built with blood money may as well be standing on pillars of sand."

...Because the ambushers had been suffering from serious withdrawals, and dangling one tiny packet in front of them had been enough to get them to spill their guts. Our captives had given up all they knew in a mere three days: everything from the structure of their organization to the contents of the packets.

It seemed that they'd enjoyed success thus far thanks to their strength on the offensive; at all other times, they simply holed up in their magic fortress. The group had fallen into a trap of being *too* self-sufficient: loyalty was absolute when the members were hooked on a proprietary narcotic, but sometimes it was best not to send out one's own if they were such a sorry bunch when pressed. I supposed this was about as much as I could expect from a clan who, at most, had only ever scrapped with remote nobles.

At any rate, our attackers had been part of the Baldur Clan, as expected. According to them, the reason they'd jumped us was because of a tip-off from the old-fashioned gangsters of the Heilbronn Familie: two adventurers had been going around and causing trouble on their turf.

Of course, it wasn't particularly strange for large clans to have territorial agreements that both sides respected. Since any violation could theoretically escalate into an all-out street war, being open with information about troublemakers wasn't that strange either...but *this* one was.

The Familie had been so kind as to give the two of us a warm welcome just the other day. While the Heilbronn thugs had been small fry who were now absolutely terrified of us, they'd pounce at the chance of reporting to their superiors if they heard that we'd done something that could justify retaliation—especially if we were trampling over an inter-clan agreement. Surely even the rank and file had at least heard rumors.

In which case, things didn't add up: *both* clans had a reason to deal with us, so why had one outsourced their problem to the other, who then accepted the job?

But having captured a high-ranking officer, we'd decided to forego all the circular deduction and found ourselves paying their headquarters a visit.

I had an inkling that maybe my brain was slowly turning into just another muscle, but I couldn't help it: it was the one organ where using it *less* often made it brawnier. Besides, every scenario was written to lead into a climactic fight at the end; the only times a session ended without a final boss was when the Henderson readings were so high that the GM gave up halfway through. I was just playing along with fate's designs, see?

Jokes aside, we were too far into this mess to solve it without a confrontation with someone at the top. Trying to fend off wave after wave of attack like some kind of tower defense game until all our enemies were dead was a stupid idea. Turning off one's brain was bad, but getting too lost in thought to continue the story was just as bad from the GM's perspective. At the end of the day, dice meant nothing if they stayed in the palm of a hand.

"Go on, show us the way."

“O-Okay, okay! I will, so please... Please, give it to me! I can’t wait any longer!”

I unhanded the airworthy witch’s collar and kicked her knees to push her forward, and she responded with a plea that sounded criminal to print in anything that could sit in an all-ages bookstore.

Do note that I hadn’t done anything unethical to her. Her face remained redder than an autumn leaf, sure—but that had been Margit’s doing, and I maintained that she’d been in the right to defend herself. In fact, we were oh so kindly helping her in a sobriety intervention; it was almost like we were doing a *good* thing!

Okay, I may have dangled a packet of snuff in front of her like a carrot to a horse, only to then burn it before her very eyes, but let’s just agree not to count that one. This was a righteous affair, and I was not in the wrong—it was very important to tell myself that. Someone had once said it’s in a person’s interest to climb onto the highest horse one could find, after all.

I’d been bracing myself for guards as we pulled up to the gate flanked by steep walls, but it opened up for us of its own volition. The yard that greeted us was set with a dry fountain, flower beds populated with nothing but nameless weeds, and a crumbling cobblestone path. Combined with the unmanned entrance, the dilapidation of it all reminded me of a corny horror film.

“Here we are,” I said. “Are you ready?”

“Do you even need to ask?”

“Of course not.”

The two of us exchanged smiles as we walked up to the front door. I was inclined to kick it down just to put a little *mustard* on my entrance, but this door decided to open itself too.

As I mused to myself about how the owner of the residence liked their pomp and circumstance, we were confronted with a dimly lit entrance hall with a lone figure standing within.

“Oh, oh! M-Master!”

As soon as she laid eyes on the figure, the witch forgot all about the packet I was ostensibly holding over her head—not wanting to run into legal trouble, I'd actually burned it all—and rushed over to cling to the shadow's feet.

"There, there... Ohh, it must have been so scary... Good girl... Good girl..."

Lit only by candlesticks more broken than whole and a chandelier hanging at a dismaying angle was a woman who looked like death.

I happened to be acquainted with a few undead souls, but the woman before me looked like a genuine corpse. Her hands, peeking out from the sleeves of a dark-gray robe, were thinner than wilted branches; her neck could fit easily within a single hand.

But most of all, her cheekbones drew the eye to her emaciated face, where two black bags ran deep below her eyes, as if tattooed in. So sickly was her pallor that her skin seemed blue; though most of her face was covered by a flood of greasy hair, it parted enough to leave room for one goggling eye in the shape of a near-perfect circle. Had someone told me she'd just been dug out of her grave, I would've had no choice but to believe them.

Yet there was a strange balance to her features, a dreadful allure that only made her more horrific. For a deathly monster to be hideous was cheap—the ugliness would chip at the sense of dread. That she retained some semblance of beauty as a collection of skin and bones let her better embody the terror of death.

"Nice to meet... I see that you've been...taking care of my own..."

This was the head of the Baldur Clan: Nanna Baldur Snorrison.



She was a talented mage—who else could build a thriving business on the sort of recreational hard drugs the Empire despised? “It seems I owe you a *warm reception*...”

“We’re fine, thank you. Rather, we’re neither fatigued or depressed enough for your offer to spark any joy.”

“Ohhh?”

Potent mystic fumes billowed around her, filling her lungs—an airborne narcotic that could whisk someone away to a land where all their dreams came true with just one breath.

If nothing else, it was a horrific substance to casually mix into the air, hoping we’d inhale it.

“You don’t *like* nice dreams? How strange... We see the same mirage every day in this thin cage of bones... Don’t you think a nice one would be better?”

“Ahh... Ahh! Agh!”

The witch below collapsed, spit dribbling at her master’s feet as her expression warped into one of ecstasy. Her eyes shut as her three days of withdrawal-induced insomnia gave way to peaceful slumber. As the sedative carried her to the land of dreams, it set course for a fantasy of pure rapture.

“Ahhh... You came prepared...”

Her lifeless eyes locked onto me and Margit’s collars, each adorned with a matching necklace. They were arcane tools—or at least, that’s what they *seemed* to be. In reality, they were catalysts from which I could cast a barrier to filter the air immediately around us.

It was a natural precaution, considering what we’d found on the persons of her subordinates. I’d taken a wary lick of their product to see if I could reverse engineer its alchemical makeup, and a potent drowsiness had immediately come over me. Paired with the knowledge that her flock could aerosolize potions for crowd control, walking in without a counter would have been grounds for the GM to tear down the fourth wall and ask, “What did you think all that foreshadowing was for?!”

The necklaces were my way of hiding my capacity for magic while still avoiding her version of death at first sight. Upon seeing our equipment, the woman ran a hand through her slick hair in genuine confusion.

“Honestly... I don’t understand... This, too, is all a dream...conjured up by a gory sack of meat...”

Shaking her head in pity, she took a hit of the very same substance that she’d just tried to force upon us. One breath was enough to put a person to sleep and show them a dream so pleasant that they would lose all desire to wake up.

Sleep Cloud was a classically basic beginner spell, but adding a major debuff that checked for mental resistance was downright immoral. Being put into a shallow nap that would be interrupted after a single hit—never mind that a single unblocked hit could very well mean death—was one thing, but the psychological horror of making the user *want* to stay asleep forever was enough to see why it was illegal.

I should expect nothing less from a former Daybreak student.

“And to think... Your charms even remind me of my old haunt...”

“Nothing is scarier to a non-mage than magic that affects the mind, you see. I think the protection was well worth the price.”

According to our captives’ testimonies, the Baldur boss was around thirty years old, and had once been a promising magus-hopeful until some scandal had forced her out of the College. I hadn’t been sure how much stock to put in that rumor, but her last statement practically confirmed it.

“Goodness... Why does every last person *insist* on ‘reality’?”

The vapors rolling from her drooping pipe served both to knock her subordinate unconscious and to deafen her own mind.

Once upon a time, a young Nanna had been like so many others before her: a mage set on unlocking the secrets to a methuselah-like body free from aging and disease. I didn’t know what, but something must’ve happened to turn her into the nihilist she was today, so disillusioned with the world that she claimed it to be nothing more than a personal illusion conjured by the brain.

The end result of her philosophy was a drug that showed its user a dream that came from the deepest recesses of their heart, dependencies be damned. Not only was her work in the deep end of forbidden teachings, but it contributed little to society at large. The powers that be had warned her to stop, but she'd been too stubborn to quit; eventually, the College had been left with no choice but to expel her.

I thought it was only fair. This wasn't some jumped-up sleeping pill: it offered rest so blissful that normal slumber became too much to bear. What was that if not a societal ailment? No matter how minimal the physical effects, letting her concoction run free was enough to bring the world order to its knees.

Rather, it was a show of genuine mercy that she'd only been expelled. Her master must have truly adored her not to put such a ticking time bomb down where she'd stood.

As was the case for practitioners of any technical line of work, mages posed tremendous risk in that their ability to cause harm was entirely contained within their own skulls. That much was plain to see from how she was using her College experience to further her illicit research and business now.

"Well then... What to do? We could settle this with force...but I'd really rather not..."

What made her operation *really* nefarious was that she provided cheap birth control to the red-light district of the city, taking on an unofficial position as a public service provider and thus keeping the local nobles off her case. I knew she must've studied politics as a magus-in-training, but it was incredible how brilliantly she was applying them in all the wrong ways.

"That makes three of us. We didn't come here to pick a fight."

I was roughly twenty paces away from Nanna. Two breaths would be all it'd take to sever her head, especially since her defensive spells didn't seem too impressive. At this point, the only barriers I couldn't cut through were those stronger than the masked nobleman's. She would need to blast me from a field away with a frontline damage-dealer to keep me still or have the speed to kite me around to pose a threat.

Although she *looked* more undead than Lady Leizniz, she was still a mensch,

prone to dying and losing control of all spells as soon as her head left her body. I couldn't completely rule out the possibility of a death-defying magic trinket, but she didn't seem the type to trade her own life for an enemy's.

Similarly, the smattering of presences lurking just out of view didn't pose any real danger. I suspected they'd been strengthened either through arcane doping or bodily modification, but I didn't detect any ungodly freak-shows like the Setting Sun lunatics I'd seen around the College. At most, they were modestly enhanced footsoldiers. While I wouldn't want to go up against someone of my own level powered up by their boosters, I didn't see any reason to fear them when the drugs were all they had.

Margit and I could easily wipe the floor with them in an all-out fight, but the problem was what came *after* that. I didn't want to earn a name for myself by crushing some giant clan, and I certainly didn't want to steal their place for myself.

"All we came to do is to leave you a little tip. It would seem that there's somebody going around using your name to stir up trouble."

"Ohhh?"

To begin with, I saw nothing enjoyable about creating a massive power vacuum. This wasn't an Asian Punk RPG, and I was no mobster trying to rule Osaka. My dream was the classic path of an honest adventurer, and I was content to leave the irony and self-scorn of yakuza life in the realm of roleplay.

In service of that goal, I needed to get these clans to recategorize me from "a kid to keep an eye on" to "a threat not to trifle with," and I'd come up with a clever ploy or two to get my way.

Removing a major kingpin here would send Marsheim tumbling into discord, and I was *not* going to pick up the slack; I wanted to skip all-out violence in favor of a minor political scuffle. To that end, all I had to do was redirect their attention.

It wasn't *me* that was making light of them. Oh, no. It was *someone else*. And, if my scheming ended up setting off a full-fledged gang war...well, that was it, I guessed. At least I'd say sorry?

[Tips] Although it would appear at first glance that research at the College abounds unrestricted, projects deemed to be too criminal, hazardous, or otherwise harmful to society are ruthlessly pruned.

This has resulted in a peculiar way of thought: carry yourself with enough grace to mask your wrongdoings. Because while the Trialist Empire does not tout freedom of thought as a national ideal, none will judge what is left unsaid.

Getting someone to listen to you was hard work if you seemed too insignificant to sway their life. With that in mind, successfully turning the tables on the Baldur officer who'd ambushed us turned out to be a great thing for our relations with the clan in spite of the obvious problems involved with that—it was funny how things worked out.

Nanna, for her part, clearly hadn't spent her College days dawdling. She'd sensed Daybreak construction off our necklaces—hard to avoid, considering who'd taught me—and quickly realized that a violent confrontation would be unfavorable.

One look at her betrayed that she was more of a scholar than a fighter, and she'd no doubt relied heavily on the magus specialty of death at first sight to handle her opponents until now. But even though she wasn't exactly a boots-on-the-ground type, whatever trials she'd faced on her way to establishing her own illicit kingdom had left her with a keen sense for danger.

Honed through experience, her sixth sense told her that I was trouble: otherwise, I saw no reason for her to offer us a seat when my initial greeting had been so suspicious and hostile.

"I see it now..." Pipe bubbling, the clan master reclined on the sofa of her drawing room. She blew out a dense cloud of mana, her lightless eyes staring off into space like someone had cut chunks out of the void and placed them in her irises. "Yes... I see the picture... So much of it is clear..."

We'd been served red tea and some snacks as a show of hospitality, perhaps, but the idea of accepting was impossible to entertain when seated across from someone whose mind had wandered off to Kadath. Her every exhalation

threatened to scramble my neurochemistry if I breathed it in unfiltered; what kind of demons did she have up there to necessitate such escapism?

I had to admit that I'd occasionally let a bit of smoke fill my head when it would otherwise go empty back in my past life, but what sort of vast lacuna was she filling with her mix? Despite knowing that true comprehension would mean that my life and dreams had come to an end, a morbid curiosity still tickled at my heart.

It was the call of the void, akin to the urge I'd felt when delivering that accursed tome to my former employer. That which led to ruin ever had an enchantment to it, always inviting you to the edge in hushed whispers. For a moment, I felt like I could see why weary souls tired of life had gathered here under her.

"Let me see... Personally, I could always make it...so that *none* of this ever happened..."

An especially dense cloud left her mouth and swirled into an impossible shape. It coiled around her like a snake, refusing to dissipate—rather, it grew thicker and thicker by the second. That had to be setup for some sort of powerful spell.

Furthermore, both the cinders smoldering on the ashtray and the water in her pipe—something ordinarily meant to *filter* smoke—were packed with arcane drugs to worsen the effect of the sentient cloud, no doubt a terrible toxin to the healthy body. It was as potent an offensive tool as it was soothing to her, sure to worm around defensive magic; but to brandish her weapon so brazenly was an affront to College protocol, even for a dropout.

The move was an obvious bluff. No matter the type, criminal overlords couldn't afford to look weak in front of their own: even though she knew Margit and I could end her before she could so much as lift a finger, she had to put on a tough front. She was assuming the dignity of a leader, stating through her actions that she was *letting* us have our way even though the truth was that her life was in our hands. Her position was so pitiful that it almost elicited sympathy.

Not wanting to put myself in the way of any more conflicts than I already had,

I saw no reason to humble her.

All I wanted was to enjoy my adventures in peace. So long as she could do that for me, I was content to let her scheme her little schemes in the shadows.

I wasn't enough of a goody-two-shoes to right every wrong I came across. I hadn't been born yesterday: I knew there was only so much one person could do, and that short-sighted "justice" could cause untold harm later down the road. Eliminating the Baldur Clan's monopoly on illicit narcotics would just let the dormant market spring back to life, flooding it with smaller peddlers doing the same. The other major players in the city, meanwhile, would fight to take the newly vacated territories, leading to gods knew how many deaths.

Though I would kill a villain espousing "necessary" evils on the spot, I had to accept that bringing the Baldur Clan down wouldn't solve any problems and that I could only take on so much responsibility.

There was no such thing as a flawless hero, and I didn't want to tip the balance of power just to kneel over the lifeless bodies of those I cared about once all was said and done.

Life was an easy thing to live so long as I kept the big picture in mind. And if I decided that the clans dividing up the city amongst themselves didn't fit in that image...then I would need to burn the whole system down and amass the power to remake it from scratch. The only thing I could build up with my sword was a trail of bodies, after all.

So for now, I would focus on my own benefit. I'd much rather demean myself than bring misfortune upon others over something as intangible as image.

"I'm sure we can offer you something much better than two heads on a platter," I said. "I know that every salesman promises this, but ours is a deal too good to refuse."

"Hmmm..."

I could practically feel the taut skin of her neck—she was in the palm of my hand. The two bodyguards waiting behind us would hardly have time to take a step. We hadn't planned anything out, but I could tell that Margit would handle them if I lunged for their leader with the fey knife.

And Nanna knew that as well as I.

“In that case...perhaps it’s time to do some shopping...”

The College was a place where students sat shoulder to shoulder with people who could delete them from existence with a flick of the pinky if so inclined. Having devoted herself to the magus’s path until her expulsion, she had to be familiar with the jittery sensation of facing a mortal threat head-on.

I had to commend her ability to maintain a cool facade; she’d clearly come by it honestly. I had no qualms swallowing my pride as a show of respect.

Besides, I was happy to oblige. Nobody wanted a bloody end—save for perhaps the cursed sword screaming into my mind...

[Tips] Power politics tend not to change no matter where you go.

A complaint is best served with company. Where a lone actor screaming in the streets is a deranged conspiracy theorist, an organized group becomes a protest. Just put a reputable figurehead up front to lead, and the whole thing can be taken as a justified movement.

Following that logic, the current situation should have been fine, but...

“You rats! You’ve got gall to show up without any notice—and even more to open the gates without invitation! What kind of barbarians do you think you are?!”

...Honestly? I didn’t see why I needed to be here. I wish they would’ve handled things without me.

“Oh, I’m sorry... Nobody was around to stop us, so I thought we were free to enter... Besides...don’t you think it’s only manners to be ready for guests at any time?”

“You better check your eyes if you think this is some fancy tea parlor, *junkie*. Who the hell do you think you are to march on in with a gang of lackeys in tow?!”

We’d cleared the board to set up a new scene at the Heilbronn mansion. We

were in the south of the city, in a somewhat rural area where there was enough space to plop down a gargantuan estate. Compared to the quiet residential district in the north where the Baldur headquarters was located, the ostentatious display was its exact opposite.

The gates stood high with lavish gilded pillars on either side, and a gaudy gold statue rose up from the rooftop, of all places. Along the stone path from the main gate to the building's front door was a menagerie of statues and monuments that screamed nouveau riche.

That the complex stood untarnished in spite of being an architectural middle finger to the know-thy-place customs of Rhine was proof that the Familie's authority was the real deal. Having survived multiple generations of succession, the group was too big even for the margrave to wipe out—or at least, too big to make it worth the hassle.

Looking up at the garish building before me, I felt ridiculous for having followed Nanna here with her twenty-odd underlings.

Truth be told, I wanted her to handle things between her and the Heilbronn higher-ups and had prepared as much evidence as possible to save me the trip. Unfortunately, the former Daybreak student had yet to forget the pragmatism of her School, and the utility of having living proof with her did not go unnoticed.

In less than a couple of hours, she'd finished her preparations and marched us into rival territory. For someone who looked so dead, she was shockingly quick to act. She still looked awfully frail, what with her sickly skin and the need for an attendant to hold her parasol, but that she held her ground against the zentaur warrior who'd come in response to her intrusion drove home how bold she truly was.

Wait a second. Considering how her natural beauty was still somewhat visible even in her atrophied condition...she wasn't one of Lady Leizniz's, was she?

"And not a single guard in sight... Don't you think *that's* the true offense? You know, when Stef came to visit the other day...we had fifty people's worth of tea all laid out for him..."

"Tch. Down to skin and bones, but you've still got *lip*." Speaking of the zentaur

warrior, though, it was apparent that the top clans weren't just big groups with nothing else to show; I hadn't expected to run into a celebrity here. "I don't care what *you* did—there's a process to this kind of thing! Have the decency to send some prior notice, dammit!"

The man blocking the front door with a giant spear in hand was a famous adventurer around these parts: Manfred the Tongue-Splitter.

Before ever coming to Marsheim, I'd considered myself familiar enough with zentaurs after traveling on the road with Dietrich. Yet Manfred shattered my preconceptions whole—he was *huge*. He was taller than two of me lined up head to toe, and his human trunk was thicker than me by a similar factor.

His was a build that could only work on the solid equine foundation that propped it up. The two halves of his body matched perfectly in both function and form: the chestnut coat of his lower half gave way to deep olive skin. Unlike Dietrich, his pigmentation wasn't the result of a suntan, suggesting that he hailed from one of the zentaur tribes east of the Empire.

Yet his reputation hadn't come from his massive frame, but from the precision of his spear. Once, a foe had belittled him on the battlefield; he'd responded by cutting straight through the man's tongue, and only his tongue. His epithet was as literal as it was impressive.

Deftness *and* size was such an unfair combination. Zentaurs were supposed to make up for their clumsy hands with raw frontline power, and it was utterly depraved that he got to overcome his people's greatest weakness. *If only I could see his character sheet...*

"All I have to serve to a sudden intruder is the tip of my spear! You can come back if your damned voodoo ever reveals the secret to decent manners to you!"

The men of the east prided themselves on their thick beards, and his suited his virile features well. But in spite of how impressive his scowl was as he barked us away, rumor had it that he wasn't even a Heilbronn member. Word on the street said that he was currying favor with the Familie's boss to earn coin, as much as that clashed with his seemingly earnest show of loyalty. Personally, I didn't think the passion to jump into action, weapon in hand, as soon as the lookouts called for him was something that could be bought.

I'd originally thought that these clans were populated solely with good-for-nothings, but maybe there was more to be seen if I gave them a chance. But then again, going from, "Huh, they aren't so bad!" to joining their midst was kind of a trope when it came to organized crime, so I was probably better off just steering clear as best I could.

"You know... Maybe the idea of prior notice would mean something...if this wasn't coming from the same group whose notice wasn't even prior enough to boil a kettle of water..."

As cool as the zentaur looked guarding the entrance, he was both a nuisance and a symbol of past grudges to the woman trying to get inside. The pipe that had thus far dangled unused from Nanna's fingers suddenly blazed, and she took in a breath without letting anything out. Undyed by rouge, her crackly lips were colored only by a thin, perilous vapor—realizing that things were falling apart, I decided to take action.

Both parties had lost their tempers, and with them, the chance to return to the topic of why we were here at all. They were too far gone to stop with just words; as much as I wanted to avoid sticking out here, I needed to reset their trains of thought.

"Going to cause another scene, are we?" Margit teased.

"I'm just going to help them cool off."

I don't think shouting or drawing my sword will do the trick...oh, I know. How about this ugly stone statue?

The ornaments decorating the path to the doorway were a random mishmash of debatably valuable kitsch. Nearest to me was a stonework in the shape of a lantern—the kind that was meant to be lit in graveyards to sooth bygone souls. Judging from the lack of soot in the candle-tray, it seemed like this one had never been used for any real purpose.

Then the least you can do is help stop a fight.

I'd been carrying Schutzwolfe this whole time just in case I'd needed her, and now was the time to tear the bag off her sheath. Bending slightly, I gripped the handle. Longswords didn't have the same curve as katanas, but that could be

worked around with a little know-how—I could still strike from the hilt.

A light sound rang out, like a pebble bouncing off a wall; the indescribably pleasant sensation of slicing through something hard and solid ran through my body; and finally, the stone lantern remembered that it had been cut, and slid across the diagonal incision toward the ground.

It landed in a thunderous cloud of dust.

“Might I suggest that you both compose yourselves? Getting so heated you failed to see me coming cannot be good for you.”

Dusting the bits of stone off my blade, I returned Schutzwolfe to her sheath with a scoff. I’d gotten good enough to cut through stone, but not good enough to avoid the debris. I was still a long ways off from the top—one day, if I was lucky, my target might never realize they’d been cut at all.

[Tips] Peculiarly enough, people in positions of power tend to mimic the practices of the nobility even in realms outside of politics—including in organized crime. Though the details differ, the elite of any system will develop rituals and shibboleths to signal their in-group status, and seemingly, announcing one’s intent to visit is a universal fixation.

Climax

Climax

Just because it is always in reach does not mean the sword must be swung, the wand must be waved, or the bomb must be detonated. There exists a time and place in TRPGs where situations can be resolved with negotiations of a more verbal bent. In the wide world of roleplaying games, some systems are entirely built around a foundation of bootlicking.

But player beware: if the GM who art in heaven deems a peaceful solution too boring, then the penalty may be experience withheld when all is said and done.

Funny how I've been a servant*, but I don't know if I'd call any job I've ever done before now in either life "part of the service industry," given how commonplace it is to make a living that way,* I thought while sweeping the floors.

Memories floated to the surface of one's attention at the most unpredictable times: today, the realization came as we closed up the Snoozing Kitten after the evening rush. I'd always thought that service jobs looked tough, even from the customer's perspective; maybe I'd unconsciously been avoiding them all this time.

The realization was followed by another: this routine of peeling veggies, taking orders, reporting to the missus or her husband, and clearing tables was part of a massive shared tradition. That I hadn't ever participated in something so commonplace left me with a funny feeling.

I may have "served" Lady Agrippina, but that had been a very different experience. All I'd done then was prepared tables according to codes of etiquette—certainly not the same as waiting them. Plus, the only person I'd been serving was my employer, making it a stretch to call it customer-facing.

More fundamentally, servants were invisible in high society. Serious blunders aside, the idea of a steward trying to please a guest was silly: that was the *host's* job. We menials may have waited upon a visitor's every need, but that was a process that did not ask us to consciously think. At most, we were to dispose of shattered dinnerware so as not to sour the mood, or whisper into a genteel ear if there was news to be shared; any more would be uninvited advice. Good manners dictated that a retainer's duty was to be as air.

Oh how different a regular tavern was.

Keeping a cheery grin was the bare minimum expected of me as I guided new customers through our house specialties and memorized our regulars' favorite items. The work was simple, sure, but boy was it tough. I found it incredibly funny that this epiphany had only just now set in after a full season of work.

Nearly twenty days had passed since I'd cut down the stone lantern like a knotted chain to forcibly untangle the Heilbronn visit.

In the end, we hadn't been able to meet with the boss of the Familie, Stefano Heilbronn; though not because my flashy move hadn't been enough to rerail the conversation. Rather, he'd been out visiting his subordinates on a morale-boosting tour. I could only assume Manfred had elected not to say that to begin with because protesting a slight on his friend was more important to him than relaying information.

Figuring that it wouldn't be worth waiting for someone who wasn't slated to return any time soon—that we hadn't forced them to recall him was likely an act of Baldur concession—we'd decided to dissolve for the day.

Lessons about making plans ahead of time aside, messengers had subsequently been passed back and forth to keep my feat of swordsmanship from being forgotten in vain. Evidently, my valiant effort had been enough to draw the Heilbronn leader's interest: he'd gone from not wanting to meet to arranging a conference himself.

What was even better, this wasn't a one-on-one where he could flip the script after the fact; he'd gone to the trouble of organizing everyone involved. That was to say, of course, everyone but the prime suspects: the Exilrat.

Yet the Familie's ears were sharp, and it seemed news of my connection to

Clan Laurentius and the fabled “Saint Fidelio” had reached them. Not wanting to get sloppy around players as big as them, the meeting had been postponed until the ogre’s clan returned from their outing.

I hadn’t been too keen on letting the mob boss call all the shots at first, but on second thought, I felt like it would be best to involve as many people as possible if I was to confront two major faction leaders. It was also proof that they’d already mentally filed me away under “Dangerous—Do Not Touch.” Including someone I was on relatively friendly terms with would keep me from letting loose with the most tried and true solution.

As it turned out, both taking down a talented mage without leaving an opportunity to counter and pulling the stunt to silence the bickering at the Heilbronn gate had made my threat level weigh heavy in the two clan masters’ minds.

All that remained was for the Exilrat to take the hint, and I would be free to enjoy my beginner adventures in peace.

“Kid.”

I was wiping down the floors with a hum when my ears perked up to a voice akin to meowing. Yet with my newly acquired skill in bubastisian, it registered as the low, gruff tones of the inn’s old master, who’d come out in his apron with a strung bird still in hand. I’d seen Margit cleanly pluck and gut the fowl not too long ago when I’d popped into the back; it was probably going into the pot to become tomorrow’s main course.

“Yes, sir? Do you need something?”

Not only was Mister Adham an immigrant, but he was the old-fashioned sort: his Rhinian wasn’t very good. Anything he said outside of his native tongue—an ethnic language spoken in the Southern Continent—invariably came out blocky. I’d decided dipping into my experience stock for a skill to understand him was worth it, just to not struggle in everyday conversation.

The missus had helped teach me, but brute forcing my mensch ears and vocal cords to adapt to the feline language had been a serious struggle. Even now that I could communicate, it felt bizarre to speak in a way that sounded like I was trying to get in the good graces of a roadside cat.

Speaking of which, I'd been disappointed to learn that learning bubastisian did *not* give me the ability to converse with real cats—though that seemed fair given the theories that cats only meowed at us because humans lacked the means to communicate via scent or posture.

Regardless, I didn't regret my decision: Marsheim was home to a sizable population of bubastisian immigrants, and having to ask the missus to interpret every time her father needed something from me would've been too inconvenient anyway.

Let me clarify that I hadn't done this just to wow people into thinking I was cultured for being able to talk to all sorts of people in their native tongue. That was absolutely, positively not it.

"We're missing some stuff. The last shipment had damage. Go to the night market and buy more."

The man tossed me a small pouch without warning. I could feel a few coins and a memo inside: opening it up, I was met with a shopping list of a handful of herbs, all vital for the Sleeping Kitten's signature taste. The supplier must have gotten lazy; whomever it was, they were in for a proper hissing-out tomorrow.

Oh, come to think of it, the courier this morning had been the new guy. He'd only recently gotten used to his post, and that had evidently gone to his head: I'd already heard Mister Adham grumble something about how he'd need to straighten the boy out.

"Understood," I said. "I'll be back in an hour."

Berylin had been a multicultural city, but the high immigration rate on the frontier had left Marsheim far more diverse. I ran into peoples I'd never even heard of on a weekly basis, and that meant the night life had developed to the point of whole markets not opening until the sun was down.

Vampires and other groups that shared their weakness to the sun were a prime demographic, and hardworking merchants were there to meet their demand. Though the day and night shifts didn't quite add up to twenty-four hour service, it was nice to be able to get almost anything at almost any time of day.

I wiped my hands with the rag hanging off my apron and put up my cleaning supplies before heading out. The streets were worn, but the bit in front of the inn remained spotless. I stepped into the darkness and took in a delightful breath of the summer night.

Soon, the Empire's pleasantly dry summer would come to a close. Back in Japan, I would have found myself on a park bench with a cigarette and a can of coffee at this time of year, listening to the chirping bugs herald a new season.

The main chirping insect in Rhine was the cricket, which was active in the summertime: here, autumn felt near when their chorus *ended*. I'd heard that the nobility customarily enjoyed their cries, with silver pieces being tossed about for particularly sonorous specimens, but it needed no clarification that Lady Agrippina hadn't been interested enough to make me raise the critters.

In hindsight, she hadn't been much for entertainment. Although she was picky with her choice of pipe stuffing, neither music nor cuisine could sway her; at most, she had a passing interest in wines. Her attention for all things not literature was so borderline nonexistent that the only occasions I'd ever been sent off on her hobbyist errands were the occasional times when she'd caught wind of a rare tome. Perhaps she hadn't been as tedious a master to serve as I'd thought.

At the Association the other day, I'd caught a glimpse of a quest for an unwilted specimen of a flower I'd never even heard of, apparently only found at the peak of a specific mountain—all just to go in a garden, mind you. There had been another asking for some foreign bird because its songs were "suitable for a refined palate." This was why the rich needed eating...

Hey, wait. I needed to put my internal evaluations back in their place: the occasional book hunts had been way too difficult to compare. I couldn't let myself forget the *Compendium of Forgotten Divine Rites* incident—certainly the psychosorcerous trauma of it all wasn't going to forget about *me*.

I supposed it didn't matter either way...because I didn't have much time to spend thinking about luxuries nowadays. Done with my shopping, I'd used the spare change on some snacks for me and Margit and ducked into an alley for a shortcut home—when a bad feeling zipped across my neck.

How many times does this make since moving? I'm getting awfully tired of this routine.

Tropes mandated that sleuthing and bargaining were ever to be followed by minor encounters for a change of pace, but it sure did feel like the GM was running out of material. I almost felt like I'd made connections in such unexpectedly high places that fate was trying to shoehorn more conflict in, as if to make up for me dodging an all-out climactic battle. I knew that was just my TRPG-addicted brain seeing patterns in clouds, but I couldn't help but tire of the routine.

They say the world is simpler than it seems, that everyone goes along without *that* much thought—but even so, couldn't they at least entertain me with a twist?

Reacting to the ill intent at my back, my Lightning Reflexes naturally kicked into gear as I ducked my neck down in slow motion.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see a cord snap taut right above me. Steel wire was a classic tool of the trade; it hadn't suited my style, but I knew many noble domestics liked it as a quiet way of cleaning up.

I bounced back up before the sound of the snapping line could finish ringing, sending a full-throttle headbutt right into the figure behind me. The trick was to straighten my neck so that the length of my spine could be a straight ram for the springs that were my legs; I'd hit harder than by swinging my forehead, and got to aim right for the jaw to boot. Sir Lambert had taught me that headbutting someone's face was a good way to get cut up by flying teeth.

The blow was a sensory swirl: forceful feedback, lukewarm blood, and an ear-grating scream. In this dilated instant, I could even make out individual teeth as they flew through the air...and one of the pearly fragments was suspiciously long.

As soon as realization struck, I grabbed the fey karambit with an Unseen Hand and slipped it into my real one. Immediately, I slashed into the neck I'd left open with my upward strike.

"Ack?!"

I'd cut away from me to avoid the subsequent spurt, but the droplet on my finger told me I was still far from perfect. Yet it also told me something else: the blood was *cold*. Cold blood was pumped only by historical inertia—the remnant of a curse on those who knew warmth only in the nectar of others' blood.

A vampire? Another rarity.

The light remained in the assassin's eyes even as he stumbled over with a hand on his neck. But with another presence on the rooftop above, I had to reach for the closest shield I could.

"Glub..."

"Whoa?!"

Their clothes flapping in the wind as they pounced, they weren't even worth comparing to my arachne companion; yet the claws that swiped down did, in fact, manage to split straight through bone.

Not mine, of course. Not only had the poor fellow failed to catch me off guard, but he'd gotten his neck sliced and used as a human shield too.

Ew, gross, I thought as I dodged his splattering brain matter. Before the second assassin could withdraw their hand, I kicked the first one's back to pin the pair against the opposite wall; as I did, I grabbed the blubbering man's sword and pulled it out of its sheath.

Huh. Another vampire. Yet vampiric as they were, their regeneration was sluggish. They weren't just recently turned, but thralls whose masters had been stingy with their blood. Unable to source their own nectar, these men were mere hoodlums.

While it seemed like vampires could multiply endlessly at first glance, the creation of powerful children weakened the parent proportionally. An imperfect touch in the balancing process could leave their fledgling kin with blood thinner than watered-down beer.

I'd once read historical accounts citing how the first Erstreich's vassals—famed for having brought down citadels alone in the Empire's foundational years—had been offered vampirism as a reward for their service. That was to say, felling an entire castle was about what one had to do in order to receive

the gift of undeath. These two-bits were the exception to the rule, turned by someone who any good imperial citizen could only describe as a bloodsucker.

Still, they had attained strength and agility far beyond that of most humanfolk for their troubles, not to mention the mostly-impervious immortality. I supposed there would always be someone out there willing to sign up for mass-produced power, as half-assed as it was.

But as was plain to see, an unremarkable vampire lost motor function at the mere cut of a neck or crumpled up in pain just from having slammed into a wall. They were nothing more than third-rate goods.

It would be an insult to even compare them to the masked nobleman I'd once squared off with. If I'd severed the neck whole, sure—but just a cut? I expected any self-respecting undead to mount a counterattack posthaste.

Not that I'm complaining, though.

They wouldn't die no matter how badly I roughed them up: could there be anything more convenient?

"Auuugh?!"

"Glub... Blub..."

Since they were already lined up so beautifully, I used my stolen sword to skewer them both against the wall. I paid no heed to the chipping steel—though I did feel sorry for the owner of the building I was defacing—as I ground the blade as deep as I could. This wouldn't kill, after all; it just hurt.

Better still, the fact that they couldn't die presented the perfect opportunity to have them sing me a little tune. Most people would already be gone by this point: internal damage was pretty much a death sentence without iatrurgy or miracles. In a world where an open wound ordinarily led to fatal infection, these fellows represented the easiest captives I could ever take.

Honestly, it almost felt like mortality was the easy way out. Even super-specimens like the masked noble must have been in pain while he trucked through the damage, and that level of endurance could only be built up by suffering through hell and back. Mentally speaking, that sounded worse than any trauma that could come with death.

“Thank you for your patronage,” I said. “But I must say, you were awfully conspicuous. What had you in such a rush?”

I recognized the men’s faces. They’d belonged to a group of three who’d dropped by the Snoozing Kitten in the evening, sipping on booze with their dinners. Margit had been in charge of their table, so I hadn’t gotten a chance to notice they were vampires, but I distinctly remembered that they’d sat in silence without the faintest hint of small talk.

I guess she was right. My pursuers hadn’t dared attack in the saint’s inn. Yet I’d been right to stay on my toes, as their fear of retribution had dissipated the second I’d left the front door.

To rewind a bit, I’d planned on moving us out so as not to bring our troubles to the Snoozing Kitten. The missus had caught on to the scent of brewing trouble, though, and forced us to stay: “Don’t be a stranger,” she’d said. “No fool would be caught dead causing a scene here.”

I had to offer my thanks to the God of Cycles for blessing me with gracious connections. Thanks to the missus’s offer, I was well-rested and had an easy way of streamlining any avenues of enemy attack.

...Oh, I almost forgot. Party of three.

“There you are.”

“Wha—wait, whoooaaa?!”

Sensing a hidden presence was more Margit’s specialty than mine, so I resorted to groping around in the dark with a swarm of Unseen Hands. The great thing about tactile feedback was that it shored up magic’s traditional weakness by allowing me to focus on things outside of my line of sight. Waving my Hands around until I felt something was a convenient makeshift radar.

The Hand I’d sent to scour the rooftops had snagged on someone, so I yanked them off...and a thin woman wrapped in a cloak came barreling down from above.

Figuring that the pattern might repeat, I let her fall unimpeded. As expected, she contorted into a funny little acrobatic pose but retained her grip on life. While I would have caught Miss Celia any day of the week, that mercy was off

the table for a crew of vampires after my head—especially when I was already tired of dealing with the back alley muggings.

“That makes three mouths ready to talk, but...”

I had a slight inconvenience. I could clean up the alleyway with magic, but how the hell was I going to drag back three bloody bodies without getting the guards on my tail?

[Tips] Vampires are famously resistant to death, but at times, mere decapitation is enough to end the lowest of thralls.

“Again, they make a mockery of themselves.”

Crunch. Unable to bear the violence of the fingers around it, a cup crumpled; those nearby drew one step back in fear. I couldn’t blame them. A solid vessel of metal had just been crushed in pure fury—the thought of what would’ve happened if one’s skull had been there instead was enough to make anyone balk.

“They never change—not since the day I first came to Marsheim. Those scheming *rats*...”

However, the display of rage before me filled me with more joy than anything else: here was a person enraged for *my* sake. Nothing could be harder to come by, save only for a friend to entrust one’s life with.

“They must think they’re clever. But they know nothing: nothing of valor, and nothing of violence. They don’t even know that schemes can only be drafted after the balance of power has been scaled and weighed.”

To liken the woman’s grip to that of a vice would be a disservice to her awesome strength. The crushed cup twisted further in her hand, and the spilling liquor mixed with blue blood as it dribbled to the floor. Make no mistake: that wasn’t the result of a jagged edge, but of the woman’s own nails digging into her hand—a mere cup could never hope to draw blood from Laurentius of the Gargantuan tribe.

Three days after my run-in with the vampires, Clan Laurentius had returned

from their campaign to much fanfare—proudly hoisting the head of a stamping drake. That hadn't been their original goal, but the beast's rampage had impeded them on the road, leaving them with no choice but to bring it down.

Stamping drakes might not classify as true dragons, but the flightless monsters were still seven meters long—twelve, including the tail—at the very minimum. From the artist's renditions I'd seen in books, they looked like iguanas that had been scaled up and made more menacing.

They were on the gentler end, with some domesticated breeds being employed to tow freight. Even so, they remained a force to be reckoned with when it was time to mate; when the season came around, there were always stories of wild individuals specimens down near roadways.

And so, I found myself attending the celebration of the second dragon-slayer in Marsheim...only to absolutely kill the mood.

To excuse myself, I hadn't intended to break the news in a place like this. Unfortunately, Miss Laurentius had noticed I had something to say, and had badgered me into spitting it out. Honestly, it was a wonder how quickly I'd lost my ability to keep a poker face. I needed to whip myself back into shape before the madam could torment me for my ineptitude.

"The weak have every right to plot the downfall of the strong," the ogre went on. "I will never deny that. But to underestimate and belittle, to pester with worthless conspiracies, to get in the way of a warrior's training—I won't stand it. I can't imagine you're enjoying this, are you?"

Here I was, begging for help in navigating the inter-clan argument I'd set off, and yet Miss Laurentius was getting angry as if they'd personally slighted *her*. All this, for me: we may have shared a duel and a drink, but this was the truest proof that she acknowledged my strength as the real thing.

"Well, yes. The hitmen were all so trivial that I was more annoyed than excited to face them."

Scuffles weren't all that bad when I got to unleash my full strength against a worthy opponent, but brushing off the rabble day-in and day-out honestly wasn't very fun. Worse still, whoever was sending these assassins was clearly making light of me, and that thought soured my mood further. I must've backed

them into a corner, considering how they'd unveiled their trump card, but even that had just been more assassins without even a rear guard. They had to be taking me for a damned fool.

Manhandling goons who I could take down while sleepwalking wasn't enough to instill any sense of victory in me. Some people found joy in any win no matter how small, but I personally found it more of a chore than picking aphids off of homegrown vegetables.

Frankly, I wanted to kick and scream. *I'm having fun as a beginner adventurer. Fuck off.*

That was all I wanted: not an apology nor money to prove they were sorry, but for them to plainly, simply fuck right off.

"I can imagine. Those fools mistake themselves. Politics are fine, and scurrying in the darkness has its time and place—but only against a foe whose life you can truly threaten. Who would ever mind a colony of ants building their fortress by the foot of her house?" The ogre's analogy truly bared her values for the world to see. "Ants should choose their foes as ants do. It is almost adorable to watch them earnestly march their meager scraps back to their home."

"They could pose a threat if they're white ants," I offered.

"If only they had the brains to play the part of termites, then," she said. "The fools mistake themselves for hornets."

At the end of the day, schemes were only ever scary when enacted by someone who posed a threat. To an ogre who could march headfirst into any of the three other clans and delete them outright, such underhanded plotting wasn't worth her fear.

Fully geared and armed with her weapons of choice, Miss Laurentius would be a walking tank ready to bulldoze anything in her path. I doubted even magic could slow her down: ogre internals were built to shrug off average poisons without so much as a sneeze. That was to say nothing of dirks and daggers—such means of resistance would be lucky to help her trim her fingernails.

I had no doubt an ogre warrior honored in her clan with an epithet had some answer to spellcasters. Not only could I make out a two-in-one poison resistor

and detector embedded in her ring, but the armor she'd been wearing upon her return had shown clear signs of supernatural protection. Most likely it'd been blessed by the shamans of one of her tribe's gods.

Hers was a people more fond of honest duels than arcane trickery: it followed that she'd be ready to shrug off unromantic spells so as to force a test of martial mastery.

As a poor little mensch, I was less resilient to poisons and attacks in my sleep, so I couldn't quite match the confidence backed by her godzillan capabilities.

"I suppose they're due for a lesson," Miss Laurentius said. "I wouldn't want to face Lauren's wrath for letting this go uncorrected."

Hurling the broken mug out of sight, the ogre rose, lapping away the blood on her palm. The lethargy that had possessed her when we'd first met was gone: her once listless eyes had regained their vigor, shining as brightly as when she'd doused herself and solicited a rematch.

Here stood a warrior—the same warrior that had once slumbered underneath a drunken stupor. I could only wonder: how would I fare if I faced her newly polished self?

"If word reaches her that pointless worldly affairs had gotten in the way of your path to mastery, I can see her coming just to cut me down in anger. Dying in battle is one thing, but I would rather not have such a pitiful tale inscribed on my tombstone."

From what I could tell, this last adventure had completely revitalized her—not in terms of skill, but of mentality, like all her jaded attitude had been washed away. If our bout had given her the momentum to move forward, I could ask for nothing more.

"Allow me to help," she said. "The rats scurrying in the ceiling have enjoyed themselves long enough. Now is the time to put them in their place."

"Thank you very much."

"But, well..." Before she could reach down to wipe the remaining blood on her pants, I offered up a handkerchief—my servile instincts were as alive as ever—and she took it with a bashful tone. "I'd like to be...compensated."

I knew very well that I was asking a lot of her, and obviously wasn't going to make her work for free. Our gold coins were usually buried underground for safekeeping, but I'd pulled some out with a portal to serve as payment.

"But of course," I said. "I'm asking for a service. It's only right that I pay you for it."

"Then I'll take you up on that offer."

Yet in spite of her verbal agreement, the ogre's blue skin grew bluer still and she shyly scratched at her cheek. I tilted my head. This was strikingly out of character for the gallant woman, and it took a long beat of pause before she spoke up again, eyes still averted.



“I, well... I’d like to ask you to spar with me every now and again—and not a word of this to Lauren.”

“Oh... That’s all?”

“You should know your worth and hold your head high. Few could ever hope to best me in all of Marsheim. It’s just, well, thoughtless dueling could lead to...breaches of custom, I’ll say.”

While I didn’t know why she wanted to keep our sparring under wraps, it seemed reasonable to me that an ogre would want for opportunities to go all out, even with dummy weapons. To that end, the deal also gave me a good way of keeping my skills sharp, so I felt like I was almost benefitting too much to call it repayment.

But I supposed it was all to do with this “custom.” Maybe it was some local tradition that couldn’t be shared with outsiders like me.

“If that’s all, then I’d be happy to,” I answered.

“There he goes again...” Cheeks red, Margit broke her silent sipping to grumble at my side.

Wait, huh? Was that a mistake? I glanced a wordless question her way, but all that I received back was a sour stare.

Her pouty, “Stop going around and stringing women along,” did nothing to clarify. I hadn’t made any promises to a *woman*; I’d only made an oath to a *warrior*.

“I’m glad we could reach an agreement,” Miss Laurentius said at last. “I took a good look at myself recently, and I realized that I need to strive for greater heights even if the path upward is treacherous.”

Huh? Sure, mock fights could still produce injuries, but I’d seen her shrug off dislocated fingers after one night of drinking. What did a behemoth of physicality like her have to worry about?

Alas, I knew nothing at the time: nothing about the tradition of spit trades, and not even about the equation of woman and warrior in ogre culture. And most of all, I had no way of imagining that her drive for improvement was only

the surface layer hiding ulterior motives beneath.

If she could be so lucky, one day, Miss Lauren might discover our bouts and set off to kill her, no holds barred.

[Tips] The difficulty of finding opponents that can match an ogre in a fair fight oftentimes leads them to take good rivals as spouses.

The Heilbronn Familie already felt like a yakuza gang, but the head of the clan seemed like he'd taken on all the marks of the stereotype while still *in utero*.

"Well, well, well. So you're the Stonecutter, eh? Manfred ain't the type to talk another guy up, but...yeah, I see it. You ain't bad."

Stefano Heilbronn was the current Heilbronn leader. According to what I'd uncovered leading up to this conference, he was a real fighter: he'd risen to power by beating his uncle Brunilde to death and taking his spot at the top.

The usurper was a gargantuan man even amongst audhumbla, towering past two-and-a-half meters. Any taller, and he could match the 10-foot pole so beloved by tabletop gamers.

Of note was his twisted left horn, giving him the plainly descriptive title of Gnarled Stefano. Personally, I wanted to butt in and mention that there *had* to have been better options—his pecs looked like he could crush a barrel in between them, for the gods' sake—but the epithets that stuck in this world tended to be the ones that could be confirmed at first sight.

"Not bad at all," he went on. "And here I thought Laurentius just had a thing for babies or something."

"Crass, even for an insult," Miss Laurentius snapped. "Do you *want* to be stuffed with herbs and served like steak?"

The scene of the meeting was a private room at the Golden Mane, chosen for its neutrality. Pleased to have riled someone up with his boorish joke, the audhumbla filled the space with laughter.

Personally, I'd been surprised to learn that the Golden Mane's status as the

premier inn for adventurers afforded it checks against the city's clans. Not only had the facility's operators demanded that each clan choose a single representative to enter, but they'd even dared to limit each participant to one bodyguard in the building—and everyone here was *obeying*. It was plain to see the sway they held.

As a result, Margit was on standby in the next room over. While it was terrifying to think that they were treating us on par with the other clans...she was still in position to help if push came to shove, so I decided not to point it out. Acknowledging that an inn with power enough to boss around the major clans had pegged us as more than somebody's plus-ones was too much to handle; for now, I would focus entirely on getting through the talks without incident.

"Your gut can't handle me, Two-Swords! Besides, can you blame me? Hard to imagine anything but a sheltered goody-two-shoes when I'm hearing about some kid called *Goldilocks*."

"You have a point. I haven't lost enough self-respect to consider you a meal," Miss Laurentius said calmly. "Anyway, I take it you've realized your error?"

"Sure. Kid still *looks* like a Goldilocks, though."

Damn. It seemed like that nickname really was making the rounds. I was much more fond of the cooler "Stonecutter" for its apparent strength; I wondered if there wasn't some way to make that the default instead.

"Excuse me, Carcass Splitter... I hate to interrupt your fun...but can we get this over with?"

"Don't you ever call me that again, Smokestack. Next time I'll rip your spine right out of your body before you can even light your little candles."

"My *pipe*, not *candles*... You really never learn..."

Apparently wrongly remembered by others as a producer of incense, Nanna Baldur Snorrison was solely responsible for keeping the muscle mass per capita of this room from shattering all upper bounds. Frail as death, the woman sat with the same lingering fragrance and terrible complexion she'd worn on our first meeting; as before, her people had kindly carried in a large hookah for her

to bubble on.

As an aside, the title of “Carcass Splitter” she’d brought up referenced how the young mob boss had brutalized his own uncle. Evidently, epithets were not only doled out for good deeds.

Funnily enough, Stefano’s reputation as a hawkish fighter was actually built on top of a history as a moderate reformist—at least, according to what I’d heard from Miss Laurentius. Though the Heilbronns were still infamous in Ende Erde as traditional gangsters, their recent carriage was that of upstanding gentlemen compared to their style under Stefano’s late uncle. Brunilde had been a tyrant, unafraid to rule by force: his protection racket for shops and corner-workers had been intense, and he’d boasted a reputation for killing any underling that rubbed him the wrong way.

With Stefano’s rise to power came a significant improvement in internal discipline—hard to imagine, I know—and a general mellowing of the entire group. The induction rituals no longer included civilian murder, and punishments within the clan had been reduced to light beatings that didn’t break the offender’s bones.

That wasn’t exactly *good*, but improvement was improvement, I supposed. Yet even these reforms drew criticism from some who thought the group had become “too soft,” so it was easy to imagine the struggle of trying to keep a grip on them all.

A young gangster bringing down his despotic uncle to prioritize the stability of his turf, joined by an outside friend in Manfred the Tongue-Splitter... The whole thing just sounded like a Showa-era yakuza flick. Stefano was reportedly a master of the war hammer, but I really wished someone would hand him a shirosaya katana for his next scrap—I could see the dramatic annihilation now.

“All right, all right. Let’s get to business.”

Finally finished laughing, Stefano took his seat and his demeanor completely shifted. Gone was the local ringleader guffawing at the pub; he had presence befitting a mob boss who’d tamed rowdy adventurers to build his legacy.

“Didn’t see this one coming,” he went on. “No mistaking it: they’re the Exilrat’s.”

“And if I recall...they belong to ‘Zwei’...”

Despite the grandiose start to the meeting, the actual information being shared was pretty set in stone—the Exilrat’s crimes were too apparent not to notice.

I already had testimonies from both the Heilbronn and Baldur members who’d jumped us, including information from a high-ranking officer. In either case, it’d been clear that the two groups had been keeping an eye on me without making extermination a clan-wide policy.

Climbing up the chain, I was met only with denial of any explicit orders to kill. I was confident in these claims; they’d both put them in writing with a pact of blood.

Naturally, they’d gone off to conduct their own investigations, but had come up short when trying to find the source of their phony hits. As a result, the deciding piece of evidence had been the “surprise guests” I’d brought along today.

“Speaking of which,” Miss Laurentius said, turning to me, “where in the world did you learn to preserve a half-dead vampire?”

“Every man has his secrets.” I punctuated my cool answer with a sip of tea —*Ooh, wait, this is good*—only for everyone else to eye me like I was some kind of freak. How rude of them.

All I’d done was take them back to the Snoozing Kitten, where the missus had given me permission to pinch some incense ash from her husband’s altar to the Sun God. One good rub on my guests’ faces had been enough to cancel out their vampiric strength.

Divine power dwelt in the residue of worship. My best bet would’ve been blessed water, but even the slightest connections could lead to consecration: the rag used to wipe down a shrine, the ashes of incense, and flowers that once adorned an altar could all be imbued with varying levels of heavenly power, depending on the faith of those who used them.

Vampires had swindled the Father earned Him a long lecture from His wife: His grudge ran so deep that vampiric hatred was coded into His rituals. Even the

cold ashes of a stick of fragrance were enough to impede their powers.

Soot from an ordinary shrine would have given them a few blisters at most, but mine was no ordinary shrine: it was one kept by a saint beloved throughout the land. The effects had been exceptional. Third-rate or not, any vampire would have been able to heal by now; yet my captives were still stuck writhing, only barely clinging onto life.

Furthermore, one threat to dump all the ash I had on them had sufficed to wish away their loyalty to whoever had turned them. It was comedic how quick they'd been to divulge. The only real challenge had been storage: I'd kept them locked away in a warehouse until today, but it had taken a lot out of me to avoid slimming them down for my own convenience.

"Hey, I won't pry," the audhumbla said. "Makes this all go smoother, so no skin off my back. Tying vampires up in the sun till they talk is long and boring."

"I wouldn't mind taking them off your hands, though... Their ashes make for useful catalysts, you know..."

"Those are bargaining chips," the ogre cut in. "And I won't stand idly by if you intend to pilfer well-earned glory."

"Don't be so heated... All I said was that I wouldn't *mind* taking them..."

Ignoring the fact that this brutal conversation was coming from the same people who'd just looked at me like *I* was the savage, all three clan leaders quickly came to an agreement to mount a joint threat against the Exilrat.

They were going to squeeze the tent-people for all the money and influence they could under the guise of reparations for hijacking their names, and I had no mind to stop them. Frankly, I didn't care if they used the situation to promote their own interests so long as my problems got solved along the way.

In retrospect, I was glad that the Exilrat had blundered so terribly. Had they not tried to hide themselves behind a convoluted series of proxies, I wouldn't have been able to rope the Baldurs and Heilbronns into supporting me. The slight on their reputations and the possibility of profit were the only things that could justify their involvement when a misstep could lead to a city-wide turf war.

Having Clan Laurentius on my side may theoretically have been enough, but I was happy to take advantage of anything that tipped the odds in my favor. Bigger backers meant more intimidation, and that was my best shot to be left alone.

“So we’ll need to drag the Exilrat out to settle the score,” Stefano said.

“But...those hermits never leave their tents...”

“I know. I almost lost my shit when they didn’t even send a standin the last time I called. They’ve got too much nerve for a bunch of rats in tattered rags.”

“They’ll probably make us meet outside the city again...or complain about how many people we bring... They’re going to have so many demands...”

“You’d think the ones who set things off would own up to what they’d started, but yeah. I bet they’re thinking it’ll be easier to ‘iron out’ any disagreements if we’re right in their headquarters.”

On top of being a group full of mysteries, the Exilrat were extremely cautious, as one might expect from what were essentially the managers of the city’s destitute. I didn’t think they’d even dance around their dealings with the other *clans*.

In essence, the agreement to file a joint complaint was hitting an impasse in trying to decide who would draw the short straw of actually representing the coalition. Preparing a neutral setting for the meeting like we’d done this time would be ideal, but that didn’t mean anything if the person we had gripes with refused to show up to anything that wasn’t on their home turf.

Unfortunately for me, neither Stefano nor Nanna cared quite enough to risk an all-out confrontation.

“Then I will go. They’ll have to listen if we take the conversation to them.”

“Huh?”

Everyone turned to Miss Laurentius, who’d offered herself up like she was volunteering for a grocery run. Unfazed, she took a sip of tea and recoiled with an unexpectedly cute, “Ah, hot,” but the rest of us were shocked.

This was not the disposition of someone who’d just agreed to march into

enemy territory to air our collective grievances. I should know—my last last visit had ended horribly. Even if the meeting went through, the prospect of turning the entirety of the slums against myself sounded like a nightmare.

“What? It isn’t such a big deal. In a cramped tent, it would be all too easy to slaughter everyone in reach. My presence alone should be enough to check any idiotic ideas. I’d like to see how much they can bark in my presence,” the ogre said with a hearty laugh. “But that said...Erich. You are the spark who set off this fire.”

Gently blowing on her tea, she cast me a sideways stare with her golden eyes. Though the fault lay with the instigators, I was aware that I’d been the one to turn this into a whole debacle by fighting back; I wasn’t going to run from my responsibility for my own mess.

Besides, what could be more intimidating than turning two swords into three?

“Of course. I’ll be accompanying you.”

“Excellent—that’s all I can ask. Then it’s settled. Does this work for the two of you?”

The pair of miscreant leaders nodded at her emphatic declaration. As for me, I was fine with anything at this point if she was going to help me close this annoying chapter.

And so, the plan rolled into motion...

[Tips] Though the clans of Marsheim seem to coordinate just enough with each other to avoid all-out war, their meetings are irregular and their arrangements unclear.

Shielded from the putrid rot of the outside world, I found myself thinking of this perfumed tent as an alternate dimension. I supposed, metaphorically speaking, it kind of was. The alien writing lining the interior reminded me of monastic inscriptions; perhaps this was the scripture of a god chased out of its homeland.

The clamor that lay beyond these walls was nonexistent within; any noise

made here would similarly fail to leak. Even trying to slip out a Voice Transfer ended without connection, meaning the room was isolated in every conceivable sense.

We were in just another unassuming tent lining the shanty town the Exilrat called home. It was unbelievable that a place like this could exist when it was surrounded by a melting pot of poverty and chaos where ragged paupers wallowed in the smell of the open sewer.

Standing here in full armor, joined by an ogre dressed much the same, and facing off against thirteen figures in tattered robes was too surreal to set in in my mind.

Legend had it that the Exilrat was run by a council of thirteen, and lo and behold, one threatening invitation later, I found myself welcomed by just that many hosts. If the rest of the rumors were also true, then none of these councilors had names or positions—they were distinguished only by a code number. Looking at them now, the only differences I could spot between them were those of stature.

“What insolent attire.”

The raspy, warbly, androgynous voice that called out to us was likely the work of whatever godly miracle pervaded the tent’s interior. Further proof could be found on their faces, or lack thereof: the inside of our hosts’ hoods were darker than the deepest cave, divulging not the slightest feature despite the candles glowing at their sides.

I couldn’t even hazard a guess at species, let alone sex. By my estimate, this level of potency could only be achieved because of how rigidly this space was sectioned off from the outside; a foreign deity unaligned with the Rhinian pantheon couldn’t hope to command miracles so mighty under our gods’ noses. No wonder they were so opposed to leaving their hermitage.

All I could perceive was that, out of the circle of seated figures surrounding us, the voice came from the figure dead ahead.

“Insolent how?” Miss Laurentius scoffed. “We are adventurers—mandated by the gods to win peace through might. How can you disapprove of our armor when this is our most earnest attire?”

The ogre took a seat on the floor, one knee defiantly raised in spite of the hostility in the air. She was covered from head to toe in leather and pelts, just like Miss Lauren had been in my memory. At her hip were two swords, no less menacing for their sheaths. Her collar was tactically exposed, giving her neck and shoulders ample room to maneuver for her flashy two-handed style. Yet while she bared skin, the taut blue muscles knew nothing of temptation; they exuded an aura of pure strength.

Even encircled by a shady mob, the ogre refused to yield an inch.

"I don't remember doing anything to be slandered as insolent by cowards who hide behind veils and hired guards. I am an *ogre*: I came into this world on a battlefield, and I intend to be buried wearing my armor. If you want to protest my choice of dress, then I will take that as an insult to the whole of the Gargantuan tribe—no, of *all* ogres."

Her posture was not just arrogance: with one knee raised, her left hand planted on the ground, and her weight shifted forward, she was signaling that she was ready to fight at any moment. Even on the ground, she towered over most of the people present, and her massive frame delivered a threat that needed not be spoken: "Make a fool of me, and you will die where you stand."

I had no doubt she'd do it. To be thought weak was a death sentence for any adventurer, as I'd learned this summer.

"...But, then, why does the boy at your side have a weapon and armor? We can hardly call this a discussion with participants like this."

The central councilor had fallen silent, and the person to their right filled in. Considering how they'd been sitting near to the center and were now running the conversation, I suspected this was our "Zwei" trying to follow up after the leader Eins withdrew from the conversation.

This was the person who'd used me to chip at the Heilbronn Familie and Baldur Clan for their own gain; the vampire who exerted their influence through mass-produced drones.

What a pathetic soul. I could make out a quiver in their voice through the miraculous filter.

They were desperate to find some kind of fault with us, if only to save face after we'd sent their bloodied thralls back as couriers when we'd accepted their invitation. *We* were the ones rudely interfering with the negotiation process; without the moral high ground, they wouldn't have any justification to try and draw concessions from us.

"Hmph," the ogre said. "More worthless quibbling. He is Erich, a swordsman worthy of my respect—and the victim of your never-ending harassment. He has endured your pestering without losing himself to rage, and you dare question why he has come dressed as a sincere adventurer?"

At every turn, Miss Laurentius snapped back without missing a beat. They'd already failed to refute her claim that armor was the garb of the trade, leaving them with no room to grumble.

I doubted they would have listened had I been the one to make these points; her being an ogre was key. Their kind truly did hold battle-ready gear in the highest regard, and none of the Exilrat councilors dared tread on her cultural traditions. Supplementing that with the oft forgotten origin of adventuring was a beautiful twist of oration.

It would seem that the ogre tendency to speak loftily before battle empowered their sneering too. Perhaps I ought to ask for a lesson in taunting sometime.

But for now, it was my turn to take advantage of the opening she'd provided. I breathed in, the inhalation setting off a cascade of skills and traits.

"First, I ask that you pardon me for speaking plainly despite my inexperience."

I concentrated on putting more force behind my ordinarily proper speech, and the Nightingale's Resonance trait I'd picked up last winter activated alongside my Lingering Timbre. Together, they bolstered my newly acquired Beckoning Command to ring clear throughout the tent.

Unfortunately for me, my run-ins with big shots didn't look to be stopping any time soon, nor did my entanglement with undercity dealings; I'd figured the investment would be warranted. The skill whittled away at my targets' resistance in Negotiation and killed the conversational momentum for anyone disagreeing with me. It was also uninterruptible—put in tabletop terms, it could

bypass skills that would reduce social damage taken.

High AC might honestly do more to intimidate a low level enemy, but advanced sessions were rife with characters overbuilt to counteract player agency. Mitigating damage was just the start: some enemies could force fumbles or outright retroactively undo an attack.

Naturally, circumventing counterplay was the next step in my progression. Right now, I was dealing with the faces of organized crime in Marsheim; I had no qualms about paying steep costs to ensure I wouldn't hit a brick wall going forward. Sadly for me, the small fry I'd swatted away up until now hadn't been worth much experience, and I'd broken the proverbial piggy bank to make my purchase.

Truth be told, I wished I'd been able to afford Absolute Charisma on top of what I had now. Alas, I wasn't in a position to be reaching for a trait so rare that only *some* of the Empire's founding heroes seemed to have had it. It was a wonderful thing that would improve impressions and draw attention from any and every person whose path I crossed...but aiming for the latest and greatest without reason was one of my worst habits. Honestly, I was already investing in more than I needed to be an adventurer.

I'd also found add-ons to shore up my Oozing Gravitas so I wouldn't need to actively be in a diplomatic setting for me to silently pressure someone. This had been a lot of shopping, but I'd probably make back my principal so long as I overcame today's confrontation.

At least, I hoped so. If not, that would throw off my plans by a lot... My dreams of human teleportation grew ever more unreachable.

Returning to the matter at hand, with my niceties said, I had no more need for humility. Humility was only a virtue in my old world: standing one's ground was the only way to get by here, especially in this line of work.

So I was going to come off strong. Not because I had a powerful insurer by my side, but because an adventurer without the guts to fight was as good as dead —because the airs we put on were all we had.

"Tell me... What world do you come from where an attempt on someone's life can be written off with a plain, 'I didn't know'?"

Unwritten as the rule was, employers were ever responsible for their charges. If “They acted on their own!” and “My secretary did it!” worked as valid excuses, then there would be far fewer scenic positions for the owning class to luxuriate in.

“I’m sorry to say, but the constant attempts on my life have been terribly vexing. I’m not here for excuses or apologies, though—I merely want to offer a binary proposal.” My logic was simple. “I assume you began by nitpicking at our ensembles in service of drawing out some kind of compromise. But let me make myself clear. Apologize or die—these are your choices.”

Wasn’t I generous for not following up attempted murder with murder of my own? They even got to choose: say sorry and fuck off, or have the Baldurs and Heilbronns line the streets with their people’s heads.

I didn’t mind either way. Mystic communication or not, my arachne scout keeping watch outside had a better sixth sense than anyone I knew; any help the councilors called for wouldn’t arrive until I’d already cut down half of them.

And besides...

“Well put! Go on, choose, you unnamed scarecrows—unless you’d rather test your luck against a swordsman crazed enough to best me in combat. If so, I have no reservations about offering what little support I can to turn one sword into three.”

...Miss Laurentius would take care of the other half.

The only question then would be how many we’d end up mowing down in total. If their forces were well-disciplined, then we might need to slaughter something like forty percent of them before they truly fizzled out; but on the other hand, that also meant one day of hard work could cause the whole organization to collapse and disappear. Whoever remained would pose little threat, and the void would be filled by opportunists disloyal to the current leadership, or rival clans and gangs currently suppressed by the Exilrat—the whole thing would naturally dissolve away.

But the end result was the same either way. I was happy to let them bow down and apologize so we could go our separate ways; if not, I was equally ready to make sure they’d never bother anyone again.

Miss Laurentius's declaration and my Overwhelming Grin filtered through a Scale IX Hybrid Sword Arts left no room for any weaseling. Silence tinged with frustration set upon the room, until the central figure eventually looked around to their peers.

After a moment, they hung their head low.

And so came the contract drafted up at the three-clan meeting. It laid all fault for this string of attacks on the Exilrat and included a long list of provisions to prevent escalation. Much of the document was unimportant minutiae about reparations that I had no mind to get into, but the most vital line came at the very end.

The Exilrat shall hereupon cease contact of any form with Erich of Konigstuhl and the personal connections thereof.

Although this contract wasn't as absolute as those upheld by gods and nobles, any breach offered an excuse for the other major clans to muster up a coalition of small-to-mid-scale clans to go to town. The agreement held no less weight than any other.

They would do well to obey the terms, lest the tent grounds turn into a sea of fire.

When all was said and done, violence was the final determiner. *Ahh. Nice and simple.*

"Very good." I nodded as the thirteenth seal of blood was pressed onto the paper. The only thing left to do now was to mete out punishment to those who'd directly participated in the attacks. I suggested that I settle the score personally, but the councilor I had pegged as Zwei had something else in mind.

"I will deal with the matter on my end—please, there's no need for you to assist. I can assure you this was not the Exilrat's intention, and truly hope you can understand that the whole issue was the work of a few rogue actors."

The speaker's panic was so poorly veiled that it came through in spades despite divine protection, confirming they were Zwei. If their inability to keep their subordinates in line was the source of this ordeal, then it followed that they'd need to make things right by their own hand to save what little face they

could.

Whether those subordinates really had acted on their own was of little concern to me. I was used to seeing the powerful push blame onto their lackeys; at this point, it registered as nothing more than scenery so long as it wasn't affecting me.

Some part of me did want to go around personally thanking the idiots who'd wasted my time with fruitless random encounters, but I wasn't so hungry for vengeance that I *needed* to bring down the blade myself. The vampiric councilor was going to be busy defending their position in the coming days, and anything I could do to add to their workload seemed fine to me, so I accepted.

And that was that. I had my peaceful days back, I'd gotten a bit of apology money out of the other two clans, and my growing reputation around town would get a big boost—outside of the Exilrat, that is.

But as a whole...that hadn't been very satisfying. I felt like I'd just been sent on a meaningless side quest in some cut-and-paste console game.

"Shouldn't you be happy enough to come home alive with one less nuisance to bother you? I myself am looking forward to walking the alleys without having one hand on my dagger."

Margit tried to cheer me up after I exited the tent, but there remained a layer of muck on my mind.

"I know... But this isn't the kind of adventuring I had in mind. Backroom deals were never part of my dreams."

As I stared off at Miss Laurentius's men clamoring over her safe return, Margit hopped into her usual spot around my neck. She was wearing her finest stealth wear today, and I didn't so much as hear a flap of cloth as she landed. Just in case, she'd also thoroughly bathed to erase as much smell as possible, depriving me of another sense to perceive her by.

"In that case..." Yet even as a darkened veil hid away most of her features, I could plainly see that her eyes drooped as mischievously as ever. "Shall I make you forget all these unwanted memories?"

I knew my actions hadn't "protected" her. This childhood companion of mine

was every bit my equal, and ours was not a relationship of one-sided safeguarding. But my outburst of temper and subsequent effort *had* been for her, and it was pretty embarrassing that she knew that.

"How will you make me forget?" I asked.

"Oh, let me see. How about...a night of celebratory drinking?" She pointed, adding, "It doesn't appear we have any choice."

I followed her finger to see that Miss Laurentius's party was already starting to celebrate. Even the big boss-lady herself seemed to be having fun; she must have been really happy with today's result.

"You have a point. I don't think we'll be getting away from that."

"With any luck, they'll serve us a banquet's worth of quality wine."

"Don't pass out on me, will you?"

"Oh? Aren't you going to carry me to bed? That's my favorite part of tying one on."

I guess I can't say no to that, I chuckled.

A few days later, six vials of ash and six canines arrived in the mail. I wasn't interested in keeping macabre trophies, though, and I tossed them out the window under a full moon.

To some, pulling strings in the shadows to avoid a climactic boss fight was the pinnacle of beauty; to me, it was a lot of work for not a lot of excitement.

Yet when I asked myself how many people would have died in the name of that excitement—what with all the factions involved—the only numbers I could imagine came dyed in deep red. For my two cents, this was about as good a conclusion as I could've hoped for. Had this been a campaign, of course, I would've been complaining over ramen on the way home about how the GM should've cut some of the side characters to prioritize the climax; but that was neither here nor there.

Nameless ash sprinkled into the night and melted into moonlight. *A fittingly boring end to a boring tribulation.*

[Tips] The Exilrat clan was originally founded to network immigrants, but has now grown to include everyone from vagrants to gangsters. Some would say that it is home to all those who lack a true place of their own.

The tent grounds they've built outside the city serve as their main hub, but their roots have spread into forgotten districts within Marsheim's walls. Though rumor has it they are led by a council, few are privy to the whole picture of their internal workings.

Ending

Ending

Depending on how a tale concludes, the connections one tied—or was made to tie—may change form. Sometimes, GMs may erase broken friendships from character sheets; at others, the system itself may codify the process in writing. Though love and peace may sit high as ideals, the reality of relationships is that some are irreparable.

Today, I was made to know: the triumphant face of a man who'd conquered hardship was enough even to smite a fellow man.

"I'm home."

On an autumn afternoon, as the countryside was abuzz reaping the year's crops, Mister Fidelio returned with a sack slung over his shoulder. The traces of a great struggle dotted his figure: bandages zigged and zagged across his body, and a large patch of gauze had been stuck onto his cheek.

Yet the saint walked in as gently as ever. His smile was that of a priest manning their confessional: kind and forgiving.

"Darling!" The smattering of guests be damned, the missus tossed her tray onto a table—that nothing spilled spoke to her many years of experience—and nimbly hopped over the half-gate to land in her husband's chest. "You're late! You said you'd be home by the harvest!"

"I'm sorry, Shymar. We were all too beaten up to make the trek home."

I hadn't heard so much as a peep of worry out of the missus all this time, but now, tears wetted her eyes and a happy purr rumbled from her throat. The hero squeezed her tightly and gingerly back, as one can only do with what they love most in this world.

"Welcome home, sir."

“We’re glad to see you return safely.”

Margit and I followed the missus out of the kitchen and offered our own greetings.

“Thanks,” he said with a carefree smile. “It’s good to see you two too.”

The wife nuzzled hard into her husband’s chest in a display of passion that would make newlyweds blush; in turn, Mister Fidelio slipped one hand behind her and used the other to scratch at the base of her ears—evidently, bubastisians were not so different from cats. But while enjoying his embrace, the man eyed us up and down with a curious stare.

“Did something happen while I was away?”

Legendary adventurers were really something else. We hadn’t suffered a single injury, and yet he’d managed to spot that something about us had changed.

Surprised, I looked down at Margit to ask what we should say, and she glanced back up at me with a shrug to say that she’d leave the decision to me.

...Well, it’s not like our little adventure would impress a hero. A little happening like ours wouldn’t even be worth mentioning to someone like him.

“No,” I said. “Nothing of note.”

“Indeed,” Margit echoed. “Nothing of note.”

Ours was neither a story grand enough to be inscribed in an epic nor entertaining enough to outline a comedy. I didn’t want to spoil the wonderful homecoming with such a stupid tale. The two of us placed our hands on our hips to feign ignorance of what he could mean; but note that we didn’t go so far as to shrug—that would have been sarcastic overkill.

“...Is that so? Well, I’m glad you didn’t run into anything serious. By the way, would you two mind watching the place for a bit?”

“Of course!” we said. They could take off until the next morning, if they wanted to. The only times we didn’t help out around the inn were when we took on multi-day jobs anyway. I poured a perfectly serviceable red tea and Margit was great with lighter meals; we could hold down the tavern, no

problem.

If anyone needed to pay for their stay, then the old master of the inn—who'd come down to see what all the fuss was about—could cover that too. His ears were down and his expression exasperated in a way that suggested he was thinking the same thing.

Easily scooping up the missus into a princess carry—that drew shrill squeals from Margit and our female customers—Mister Fidelio made for the back door, only to stop in his tracks. Having almost forgotten about his plans for a celebratory feast, he turned to me with a request.

"Oh, before I forget: would you mind going shopping later? Get as much meat as you can, and a little bit of good liquor. Just ask at the usual place, and they'll get it ready."

"Yes, sir. I take it everyone made it home safely?"

"Yeah. They're all bottomless pits, but I'm counting on you. Honestly, you'd think they'd take it easy considering how one of us *just* recovered from a nasty gash in the gut, but..."

Despite voicing complaints about his partymates, the adventurer's smile betrayed a happy ending. His grin was infectious, like the whole journey had truly been worth every second—I doubted anyone could smile like that if they'd lost a friend on the way.

"Leave it all to us. Please, take a moment to unwind."

Truth be told, I wanted to hear the freshly picked tale of adventure right this very instant...but I couldn't bring myself to get in the way of the missus's joy. The secret to longevity was to avoid silly deaths like walking up behind a horse, and this was one of those moments.

As it turned out, the missus had been worried too. I'd overheard her telling Margit that, "He'll be fine. A good wife can live her own life like usual while her husband's out," but *of course* she'd worry. Here was a hero who'd slain dragons—who'd felled a criminal syndicate in one night—setting aside an entire summer for one campaign. No matter how much faith she had, the anxiety would always creep in.

Rather, it was probably scariest for those who knew him best. She could tell herself he'd be fine, but the inkling of doubt would always grow in the cracks of her heart. That she could push it down and send him away at all spoke volumes to her character, and to a depth of love that could conquer any fear.

"Oh...and Erich."

"Yes?"

"I plan to take it easy for the foreseeable future, so...what do you say we schedule a match sometime?"

A match... A match?! After a moment of mental processing, pure excitement overtook my brain. *I get to spar against a real hero! I can't see the limits of his power, even with all the training I've done until now, and I get to fight him?!*

"Yes, sir!"

"Good answer. Okay, I'll leave the inn to you."

The living legend walked out of sight on silent footsteps, taking his dearest's tearful cries of "Darling" with him.

As the couple disappeared, a chorus of sighs flooded the tavern floor. Everyone, customers and staff alike, shared the same overflowing appreciation for the wholesomeness we'd just witnessed.

"Splendid. The homecoming is always the most beautiful of scenes. This is what makes a story shine."

One of our regulars recessed in flashy clothing took a sip of tea and pontificated to himself. He was a troubadour who roamed the lands around Ende Erde, and his reputation preceded him, especially around here. He rented out one of the nicest suites at the Snoozing Kitten on a yearly contract, and apparently did all his writing here. A virtuoso of the six-stringed lyre—think basically a guitar—he'd even been summoned to perform at the imperial palace before; but he was perhaps best known for his saga, *The Saint Comes.*

That's right: he wrote about Mister Fidelio.

The titular saint of the tale tended to refer to him as "the catchpenny scribbler" or "the faux poet" on account of his "exaggerations and romantic

notions," but anyone could tell that his insults were levied with a friendly tone.

Although their relationship may have begun out of the singer's search for material, any adventurer would be jealous. After all, the poet was ever the adventurer's greatest fan. How else could they sing with such heart to inspire generations and generations to learn the same tales they so loved?

"The hero returns home, the smile upon his face like any other—wounds boasted not, his triumph made naught more than chore... Hmm, a bit flowery, maybe. Perhaps a bit simpler?"

"Hah, he's back at it again."

"Try not to go too far this time! Don't wanna see you catching another jab in the ribs."

Quiet yet sonorous, the man's baritone carried well through the room. Him pulling out a memo book and beginning to sing spurred some of the other regulars to merrily pipe up. Perhaps this poet's presence and the prospect of hearing a new saga in its infancy was what brought many of our guests to spend their afternoons relaxing at an inn in a city where they already lived.

This was the artist's way of paying back his subject, I was sure. Instead of loudly advertising the Snoozing Kitten's name, he came here in person to draw smaller, more discerning crowds.

Man, I hope poets will be singing about me *one day.* I may not have accomplished anything worth putting to writing since coming here, but mark my words: I would one day.

"A relationship like theirs would be so lovely."

Surprisingly, the statement came from Margit, who let out an affected sigh, her cheeks propped up in her hands. Her enchanted gaze was pointed to the back, where the couple would surely be reaffirming their love to make up for the time they spent away from each other.

"What's the matter? It isn't polite to stare, you know."

"Huh? Oh, uh, sorry. It's just...I thought you'd always be by my side, so..."

Embarrassingly enough, I really did let Margit spoil me. The only reason I

could carry myself so confidently was because I was always sure I was safe from surprises; I could only move forward because she had my back. So I'd never imagined that she'd be so taken by the idea of waiting for someone's return.

"I'll have you know that I am quite the maiden. Breathing my last by my chosen's side is lovely, but so too is stirring a pot while waiting for him to come home." In a teasing tone, she added, "Perhaps that's a touch difficult for a boy to understand."

I couldn't say anything to defend myself on the spot, so I tried to imagine it instead: I marched into danger. Margit wasn't on my back, but even if I had to pull back and retreat, she was there waiting for me at home.

It wasn't bad. Everyone needed a place to call home—somewhere they could truly rest without fear. To become certain that home would never disappear was one way of growing stronger, and I couldn't deny how secure it would feel if Margit were the one watching over it. She was the type to succeed at everything she did, leaving no need for worry. Though her kind of arachne didn't build nests, I had no doubt she could fashion one most comfortably.

"Well? What do you think of a homely me?"

I thought for a moment and said, "It'd be nice. Nice, but..."

"But?" she cooed with a wily tilt of the head.

Here was yet more proof that I'd been made without the capacity to resist her. If I ever began finding joy in letting her have her way, it was over for me.

"But I bet my back would get really chilly."

I raised my arms in surrender and coughed up the truth. In return, I heard a little snicker. Neither the sound of a tray being set down or of a flapping apron followed before I felt a faint warmth on my back.

Cozier than any mantle, this partner of mine was a treasure more precious than the sturdiest home. Her warmth was enough to make beds out of grass and pillows out of stone; with her, I could brave storms of arrows and whirlwinds of blades.

"Then I'll be sure to keep you warm. As captivating as the idea might be, I'm

sure the kitchen would bore me in two days' time."

"Are you sure you don't mean half a day?"

"Oh? You should know better than to call a huntress impatient."

Her hand slipped forward to pinch at my cheek, and I obliged without a fight.

Ah, this is so much fun. Adventures were great, but the easygoing day-to-day in between was wonderful too.

But if I can have it my way...next time will be a campaign worthy of a saga, I thought as I listened to the minstrel sing. His voice reverberated into the afternoon, and all I could dream about was what kind of grand tale Mister Fidelio had gone on—but that would have to wait.

For the hero would not be around to regale us until he and his wife walked bashfully down the steps around noon of the next day.

[Tips] Troubadours are keepers of stories who spread tales through song and instrument. Their melodies are proudly passed down to keep ancient accomplishments alive: in this way, they can be said to be both an adventurer's first fan and final companion.



The tale that follows is not from the timeline we know—but it might have been, had the dice fallen differently...

One Full Henderson ver0.6

1.0 Hendersons

A derailment significant enough to prevent the party from reaching the intended ending.

The Trialist Empire was home to many a tavern whose name was known throughout the land. Yet there was one on the frontier known to its regulars to be a cut above the rest. True, that was in part because they knew nothing else; but none could deny that it boasted peerless quality.

A strong, but not overbearing mystic glow illuminated the floor in a show of class scarcely seen in noble mansions. Not a speck of dust could be found on the caramel floors, and the only thing that ran across the snow white wallpaper was a gorgeous gold pattern. The matching tables and chairs were in mint condition, as were the plates and cups of pure sterling silver.

Of course, the drinks within were no less immaculate: a delicate aroma danced off their surfaces, frosty enough to cool the throat in the blaze of summer and cozy enough to warm the soul in the desolation of winter.

Meats too soft for knives lined the patrons' plates, ready to fall apart at the slightest jab of a fork. Beside them were vegetables that had never learned how to impart bitterness upon a tongue.

The bar counter meant for solo customers had been carefully made out of one unbroken slab of cedar. Rumor had it that the thick-bottom glasses used here could slide from end to end across the perfectly polished surface.

Only a few locations in the imperial capital, tailored to the most tasteful of the upper crust, could boast such magnificence. For this establishment to be found in the western borderlands, in the oft mocked ends of all earth that was Marsheim? Who could ever believe it?

Yet here in the frontier city's southern side, in a quiet little alley, was the bar.

Placed in a dead end, the knotty path to reach its door had become a natural barrier of sorts for those who knew not its precise location. Even those who'd heard the rumors would struggle to navigate the labyrinthine network of streets without directions.

No chic sign advertised its presence. Although it was a touch cleaner than the buildings around it, it wasn't so much so that it would catch an observer's eye. Many guests bemoaned the subdued exterior as the establishment's only flaw, but the owner's response was ever an audacious grin and a sly, "This is what a hideout should look like."

One might think the proprietor a fool unsavvy in the ways of a customer-facing business, but that was hardly a problem here. For this location engaged in a practice practically never seen outside aristocratic circles: it turned away uninvited guests at the door.

Indeed, the meticulous interior design, superb food, and first-rate drink were not enough; only a select few adventurers were allowed entry. This was, undeniably, the only one of its kind in the whole of Rhine. So of course it didn't need an accessible location or an eye-catching sign—it wasn't that sort of place to begin with.

Yet in spite of its strange business strategy, the lounge found itself livening up just as any other did when evening set in.

The visitors were invariably experienced, high-ranking adventurers. Leaders of famous clans, heroes known for their one-man exploits, up-and-comers blazing through the ranks, and so on. Not a single one was poorly put together. Even parties who'd stopped by after work were clad in the finest of armor, and their courteously wrapped weapons were legendary artifacts that would make a collector's mouth water.

A graying but sharp mensch man handled the bar with grace, and a crew of smartly dressed waiting staff filled out uniforms of every shape and size as they hurried about greeting guests. The service, too, was designed to be perfect for its guests.

At times, individuals broke off from their tables and ventured across the floor to mingle with familiar faces. Every adventurer needed to keep up on recent

events and regional affairs, and such topics flew back and forth.

Pubs were ordinarily the scene for baseless rumors and tales exaggerated to keep others' attention, but this place was reserved for the cream of the crop. Socialization here was a game of strategy, each topic a playing piece; the gossip here was more than dressing to accentuate one's drink.

While none here were particularly refined in etiquette, neither were they barbaric: the roaring laughter and desperate mood-making found at usual drinkeries was absent. On top of the requirements in adventuring, the members of this exclusive club had to have character fit to impress the establishment's owner. The calm, relaxing atmosphere was a joint endeavor curated by proprietor and customer alike.

"What do you recommend today?" An adventurer sat at the counter and called out to the barmaster polishing glasses on the other side.

The customer looked very young for his age. More childlike than childish, his features were capped off by his trademark head of spiky hair and a scar that ran down his cheek. Beside him was a woman who smelled faintly of herbs. A single look at her robe and the countless catalysts hanging from her person sufficed to mark her as one of the few mages in this line of work.

"Let me think..." Faced with a request for recommendation, the grayed man looked through the wall of bottles behind him and brought one down from its shelf. "How would you like a Franziscus? It comes from the priests at the Sylvius Monastery, who stumbled into the recipe while experimenting with a distillation device. The herbal blend and juniper berries make it go down real smooth and leaves you feeling refreshed."

"That sounds good to me. How's it best served?"

"Well, let me see... What do you say to an Anvilcrusher Sven? It's a mixed concoction that heightens the alcohol's flavor while keeping it easy: Franziscus with bubbled water, and a few drops of lemon juice for fragrance. It's the perfect first drink of the night—a real whistle-wetter."

Sold on the premise, the adventurer ordered two—one each for himself and his partner.

“Come to think of it,” the adventurer said, “this is the Anvilcrusher, huh? He was a weird guy... Never heard of a dvergar going outta his way to *water down* booze like him. It’s been, what, half a year?”

“Indeed. He gave up his life defending a riverside canton from the son of a giant who’d come down from a nearby mountain. I hear the half-giant swung at him with a house’s foundation, and yet he still managed to hold his warhammer high, trading blows until both of them fell. A true shame to lose a man like him.”

“At least the guy went out in a blaze of glory. Wouldn’t want him to end up being the next Knifeslinger Dimo.”

The spiky-haired adventurer’s laughter drew out a scolding from his apothecary partner, but the bartender seemed not to mind, instead mentioning that he could prepare a Dimo if that would so please them.

This was a tradition at this establishment: when famous adventurers drank here, their go-to mixes were christened with their epithets as a show of respect. What had begun as a little game when the proprietor had heard of a friend’s death was now a trend that had spread throughout Marsheim.

But of all the merry drunkards ordering Anvilcrushers across the city, it was hard to say how many knew the drink got its name from a fallen adventurer.

Adventuring was, in a way, a career in public image. Once one’s days of journeying were over and their songs were no longer sung, they were quick to fade from the zeitgeist. Those whose exploits survived tens or hundreds of years were not just heroes, but the mythical champions who stood a cut above the usual living legend. Most were forgotten, just as the minstrels who sang of them slowly lost their tale as it bounced from one to another.

One day, even their tombstones would crumble away. Whether living on in the city’s traditions as the name of a drink was what they truly wanted, the living would never know.

The ridiculed Knifeslinger Dimo had been a floresiensis man famed for his expertise in slinging knives...but what was more well-remembered was his unique fetish for laying with women who hailed from the largest races. Eventually, his proclivities had gone too far: chasing greater and greater “opponents,” he’d gallantly fallen in a very different sort of battle.

Naturally, the man had been a regular, and countless Knifeslingers had been raised in his honor in the wake of his passing—all accompanied by a cackling roar of laughter, of course.

The drink itself was made with the bar's famous chilled ale, white wine, and a dash of cinnamon. It was a strange mixture, but unlike the story of the man's death, the concoction sat easily on the tongue. In the far future, tales of its origin would be forgotten as people enjoyed the recipe throughout the Empire; for now, though, it remained the starter to a crass joke.

Of the place's clientele, the younger adventurers tended to order strange drinks—that were often followed by a scrunched-up face—with the hopes that they, too, would one day leave their mark on history. But the adventurer at the bar didn't seem to have much interest in such games.

"Never a dull night around here, huh?"

Though his drink would have stung taken straight, a mellow flavor hiding a hint of refreshing fruitiness danced on the man's tongue. Munching on a platter of dried meat, cheese, and boiled beans for his supper, he looked out at the bustling hall.

"It's been some time since your last visit, hasn't it, Mister Siegfried?"

"Guess it has. We made our way pretty far out for our last job. But this place never changes—the regulars here'd make a poet froth at the mouth."

An ogre with two blades on her hilt was treating her subordinates to a round of good liquor; a waitress was sheepishly asking a zentaur warrior about her outstanding tab while simultaneously delivering the woman another bottle of whiskey; a mage clad in draping robes with a long staff crowned with golden bells who was too gorgeous to belong here was slumming it in a corner. Each and every face was one known throughout Ende Erde, whether through the townsfolk or the deeds in their sagas.

As for why they were all gathered here, it was because this was one of the few places they could truly unwind. Few other places could offer reprieve from poison and inter-faction strife.

"That said, it's been the same cast of characters for the past few years..."

As if to punctuate the adventurer's statement, the merry atmosphere burst at once. The door blew open with a splitting noise; the guests rose, wondering if the crown itself had come to take over their sanctuary. Yet all the chaos was the result of one unmannered kick.

"The hell's this 'invitation required' shit, anyway? Who the hell do you think I am?"

The intruder was a young man. He was not very well put together, nor did he give the impression that he was in the habit of bathing. However, the same could not be said for the longsword at his hip: even sheathed, its utilitarian design was of blatantly impressive quality.

A few of the customers knew him. He was a reckless new adventurer who'd moved to Marsheim half a year ago and had earned a name for himself on account of two things: his immense talent for the blade, and his propensity for picking fights with those who stood above him.

Although he hailed only from some backwater town even further west than Marsheim proper, he claimed to be a noble's bastard son in broad daylight; he was so short-tempered that any who dared question the veracity of such claims were quickly cut down. No matter how true his skills, the question of his character had given rise to a reputation that was, bluntly put, not very good.

Ever since a handful of middling veterans had fallen to him after trying to put him in his place, the community at large had begun to leave him alone—no use in chasing a fight that didn't come with a bounty, after all.

Having recently dusted off his soot, he had apparently decided that tonight was the night that he would grace the elusive bar of legend with his presence. Where he'd gotten the details was anyone's guess.

Being denied entry by the bouncer creeping in the shadows out front had soured his mood significantly, if the forceful entrance was anything to go by. The wailing hinge barely managed to hang onto its fanciful door, but the graying barkeep furrowed his brow all the same—just beyond in the doorway's shadow, the bouncer was hunched over clutching at a bloodied arm.

"Heroes have the privilege of drinking here, right? Then who the hell could you be serving booze if not me?"

The hubris was palpable. His arrogance stemmed from the presumed invincibility of youth, but alas, the true tragedy here was that he had been gifted with enough genius to overpower a man the proprietor trusted to guard his front door.

Until now, the man must have always gotten his way. Perhaps he'd been born to a family privileged enough that his audacious self-reported lineage could go unpunished; but worse was that his bloody talents prohibited any from righting his course. Unchecked, he had lived a life never learning the consequences of a sword drawn at the wrong time, in the wrong place.

Two more guards slipped out from behind a pillar near the entrance, drawing their weapons.

"Hey, now. I don't remember ordering any steel. Or is it tradition for the house to treat its guests?"

Every now and again, an overly ambitious youngster came knocking on these doors. Fueled by adolescent dreams and infinite confidence, they showed up ready to join the ranks of legends. Such recklessness was cute; any adult would surely see bitter memories of themselves in their naivety and simply tell them off with a smile.

And, up until this point, the rare unsolicited visitor had indeed been easily shooed away by the bouncer. Of course they had: those who manned the front door were hand-picked for their exceptional strength by the owner himself. Being told off by someone who was clearly stronger usually sufficed to scare the average kid. At most, they would run off swearing to one day earn an invitation and make the bouncer bow at their feet.

A few idiots tried to muscle their way through, but they'd all been sent packing...except tonight's. On this day, the fool was more foolish than any who'd come before, with terribly unbefitting power to match.

While the bouncer was ordinarily enough to keep the peace, two guards were perennially stationed within as a safeguard against drunken adventurers causing a scene. This made the first ever instance that they had to fulfill their duties.

Neither of them offered the customary warnings of a guard. No "Are you sure

you have the right location?” preceded their joint attack; the need to hold back had evaporated as soon as they’d seen their comrade slumped over outside.

Their swords lunged for the vitals with precision enough to impress the skilled clientele looking on. Perfectly in sync, they sliced...through thin air.

“Wha?!”

“Too slow, pals. Just pathetic.”

The pair were surprised to find the voice coming from their backs. In what seemed like a cosmic prank, the young man they were supposed to have chopped in two had outflanked them. His blade remained undrawn, and no weapon could be found in his hands—yet something had slashed them in the chests.

“So this is all it takes to get a job around here? Not all it’s cracked up to be, eh?”

“Ack...”

“Gah...”

The guards collapsed, unable to believe the blood bubbling into their mouths. Two low thuds echoed across the room.

“There. Plenty of proof that I’m ‘worthy’ of this pub, don’tcha think?”

The newcomer’s unwavering assurance that he’d proven his case caused the regulars to hang their heads.

“Oh, man... You’ve done it now, kid.”

“The hell? Done what? You gotta be strong to come here, yeah? I don’t see the problem with showing that I fit the bill.”

Still sipping his Anvilcrusher from a barstool, the adventurer didn’t even make an effort to hide his disgust at the events that had transpired. Meanwhile, the apothecary next to him rose with a hand in her inner pocket, blue in the face at seeing the injured.

“Lemme tell you: I’ve got a bone to pick here. The hell’s some bar owner got a fancy title for? Who’s he think he is to pick and choose his customers?”

“You’re free to be as stuck up as you want, brat. But I can’t think of anything worse than spilling blood here.”

Anyone and everyone who spent their time here knew there were only three rules. Simple and clear cut, there was no getting around them, and the adventurer graciously listed them out for the rude trespasser.

Rule one: *Vomit shall be cleaned by the vomiter.*

Rule two: *All will be gentlemen regardless of gender.*

Rule three: *Spill no blood.*

Never had anyone broken one of these rules without incurring the owner’s wrath. It didn’t matter how famous, experienced, or well-regarded the perpetrator was.

“Isn’t that right, Fixer?” As the adventurer downed the last of his cocktail, the target of his words had shifted away from the arrogant young man—and to the group who’d shown up at the front door. “Almost like you were waiting for your big entrance.”

“Oh, please. I’ll have you know I don’t appreciate the God of Cycles’ little jokes.”

“Master!”

The graying man at the bar raised his voice. How could he not, when he had never once failed the proprietor to this degree in all the years he’d managed the floor? Had all gone smoothly, the master of the business would have been busy negotiating the procurement of quality liquors at a local Wine God temple until well into the night. That would’ve forced the bartender to offer his apologies at a later time, but would have also afforded the opportunity to right the wrongs himself.

Alas, the owner had returned.

“To begin with, do you really think I’d stand idly by as an untamed mutt gnaws on my men?”

Proprietor of the Golden Fang; the Fixer of Ende Erde; the Untouchable—many were the names of the adventurer who reigned over Marsheim. With a

crew of bodyguards at his back, he looked the part of a noble—not to mention his refined garb. Over his left shoulder hung a half-mantle made from the dragonskin he'd won on an outing still sung of; at his hip was the legendary Schutzwolfe, said to have sampled as much blood as there is life; adorning his head was a shimmering waterfall of gold no less vibrant than when he'd earned his first epithet.

Though removed from the realm of youth, Erich of Konigstuhl's thin visage had hardly changed since he'd first arrived at the ends of all earth. Despite being a head shorter than the bodyguards surrounding him, his presence was as large as the best of those gathered inside.

He was a walking bundle of might, with countless stories to his name; perhaps the most infamous of which was how he'd matched the Saint of Marsheim. To this day, people whispered about the Nightmare at the Tent Grounds in fearful awe—the incident that had solidified him as the living embodiment of Marsheim's balance of power.

"So you're Erich? Hmph... Smaller than I thought. From everything I'd heard, I woulda thought you'd be tougher."

Yet the young man did not yield an inch. Maybe he thought that to acknowledge the strength of the legend in front of him would be to lose, in his own way. Whatever the case, he walked over until the two were nearly touching, and looked down with a dauntless sneer.

The guards were seeing red from the sheer audacity, but their master raised one hand to keep them at bay.

"I think I've seen enough."

"What, you can already tell? I'm stronger, aren't I?"

"Not quite." Slipping past the boy with a diagonal hop, Erich elaborated, "I've seen enough to know you aren't worthy of our service. We don't keep scraps to feed stray dogs around here."

Faced with an insult that went beyond mere taunting, the young man froze. His brain simply refused to comprehend what he'd heard.

The onlookers made faces. *Anyone* would have gotten upset at a slight like

that, and the moody greenhorn was sure to erupt in fury.

Yet things did not turn out quite as he'd hoped.

"...Huh?"

He couldn't feel the weapon in his hand. When he looked down, he saw nothing: not his hand, and not even his body.

His forehead hit the floor with a dull *thump*, but it didn't hurt. Before he could process what had happened, his vision began to blur, and it faded entirely before he ever got a chance to understand.

The man died ignorant—both of his own stupidity and the power of the foe whom he'd antagonized.

Perhaps this fate was his greatest solace. His long life of violence had finally come to an end, without pain, and without the bitter realization that the world was bigger than he could ever have imagined.

[Tips] The Golden Fang is an exclusive bar in Marsheim open only to two kinds of adventurers: proven heroes and promising talents who catch the owner's eye. Despite the classy interior decor and high-quality food and drink, the prices remain reasonable. Of particular note are the establishment's unique specialties: ice-cold drinks in the middle of summer, and a kind of water that bubbles from within.

Yet beneath the surface, the location doubles as a pillar of balance upholding the delicate scale of inter-clan relations in the city. When clan leaders need to gather for a confidential meeting, it becomes a fortress wholly separate from the outside world.

How long had it been since I'd stopped caring about how insolent and boorish it was to smoke a pipe without using a hand? Or since I'd begun letting my underlings take off my outerwear when I entered a room without causing a fuss? Many, I supposed, was the answer.

"Sorry to make you work, and thanks for lending a hand. Will my men be all right?"

"...Yes, I think they'll all make it. He seemed more interested in showing off than anything else, and the quality of their armor has made the difference."

"I'll leave it to you, then. Note the expenses here."

One of my regulars was an apothecary, and she must've rushed to treat the wounded before anyone else. Along with a word of thanks, I slipped her a paper check with the sum left blank. She was around my age, and we'd spent a lot of time working together in our youths; I'd seen the potency of her healing potions and knew my men were in good hands.

As much as I hated to admit it, the unthinking moron whose head I'd lopped off had been a skilled swordsman; the silver lining was that his precision cuts would probably give my first subordinate outside a chance to reattach his arm. The wound had been hauntingly perfect, to the point where even the mages I personally kept on hand would be able to graft it back on. It would take a lot of time and effort for him to get back to his original skill, but I'd spent even more time and money raising him up. I hoped to see him make a full recovery.

"You're a generous man, Fixer."

"I like to think I know where to spend and where to save, Luckstrong."

"Hey, knock it off. That name makes it sound like I got to where I am with just dumb luck."

Tease and be teased. I'd learned my lesson twenty years ago: to lose one's composure was to be made light of. He'd called me by an annoying nickname, so I'd simply returned the favor; I'd long since made this sort of response second nature.

"And to my dear guests. I'm terribly sorry to have soured your nights by subjecting you to the reek of blood on your off hours. Let me shoulder the blame and repay you—tonight's bill will be solely on me. Please, enjoy yourselves to your hearts' content."

Navigating turmoil was another skill I'd picked up along the way. Apologizing to my patrons for letting some numbskull spoil their fun—on second thought, I shouldn't have let him off so easily—I ordered the reinforcements who'd shuffled out from the back to take care of the body and clean up the blood.

In less than an hour, a nameless body would fall down a deep hole until it could say hello to the slimy sewer keepers that lived within. No one would ever know that blood had been spilt here tonight; those who did would choose to forget by daybreak.

When the haves spoke, the world listened.

Goodness. I've gotten so used to all the worst things.

I sighed at how the adventurers unanimously celebrated the unexpected free liquor—*but don't you think I forgot about your tab, Dietrich*—but I could understand. My time at the game table had taught me that spending every penny on gear and provisions was the prerequisite to heroics, and that was as endless a cycle as rats running on wheels. I couldn't blame them for celebrating charity.

That said, the leaders of big clans had enough money that they didn't need to be calling for more of their crew to join them. *I'm looking at you, Miss Laurentius.*

In the back of the room was a couch and a low table used to seat our most esteemed guests—but it was also my usual perch. I didn't like it, but I sucked it up because claiming a seat like this was an easy way of looking important.

Speaking of which, I'd figured that if I *had* to sit on an overblown sofa, I at least wanted it to be comfortable. That had led me to spend fistfuls of gold to deck it out with the best trimming and stuffing imaginable. It gently caught me as I planted myself on it, but to be honest, it didn't really do much for my mind.

I'd been so pleased with how smoothly negotiations had gone, too. Having to cut down some impious brat, paying needless expenses, and even letting my own get hurt had thoroughly ruined my day. I wanted to tell the gods that fortune and misfortune didn't need to be balanced out like a ledger; even if they did, there was *clearly* a deficit on the books.

My trick of piercing the heart to stop his movements before severing the neck had managed to keep gore from spewing everywhere, but I wasn't the type of person who could knock out for a full rest the night after killing someone in cold blood.

“Master, I’m terribly sorry for all the trouble.”

“You don’t need to apologize. I’ve already made the culprit pay with his life. All I ask is that you clean everything up without any noise.”

“Of course, sir... Shall I bring you the usual?”

“Please do. No ice or water needed—in fact, bring me the whole bottle. And just something to chew on.”

But no matter how upset I was, I had to buckle down and put on a tough front; otherwise, my sour mood would make all my subordinates shrivel away. Heaving my anger out in a puff of smoke, the man I always trusted to manage the bar—come to think of it, buying this tavern of his had been the beginning of this joint—came back around with my favorite golden courage to bring up my spirits.

I’d once again reached the age where my tongue longed for the amber glow of straight whiskey—or at least, something close to it—but if I went back and asked my fifteen-year-old self if this was what he dreamed of becoming, I suspected he’d spit at my feet.

Fair was fair: I would lay a hand on his shoulder and somberly say, “Haste makes waste.”

Honestly, what had been wrong with me to think that just because Mister Fidelio had done it, I could skip the tedium and wipe out the Exilrat by myself?

At that point, I’d already been utterly fed up with their meddling, and the subsequent Heilbronn and Baldur involvement had pushed me over the edge. Embarrassed as I was to admit, I’d really let my temper get the best of me. I mean, if I was going to go so far as to destroy an entire clan, I should’ve just put in a word with my old boss and saved myself the trouble.

The consequences of my actions caught up to me, and I now sat in the uncomfortable seat that was the Fixer of Marsheim. Had I known that blowing up a major clan out of sheer rage and slapping around another two for their troubles would land me here, I liked to think I would’ve cooled off a little.

To come clean, though, running rampant off nothing but my emotions had been pretty fun. Yet I hadn’t had it within me to let the city fall into chaos by my

own hand when I'd only just decided to settle in; my commitment to uphold the bare minimum amount of my own responsibility was what had led me here.

I knew I'd only reaped what I'd sown, but if the world was going to quibble over its aphorisms like that then I would have also liked to see it uphold the principle of karmic debt. If anything, as the innocent bystander trying to mind my own business until the fight came to me, I'd been the *victim* in the situation. Had they wisened up and apologized sooner, things would not have snowballed into the nightmare that had unfolded...or at least, that was what I liked to tell myself.

Alas, the more I thought about it, the more I was made to know that it had been my own damn fault. I cursed the gods who'd given me only enough good sense to know my own folly after the fact.

Is this what it means to be an adventurer? I'd buckled under mounting provocation, rampaging against the thought of being used and leaving a trail of bodies in my wake. *No, this is my ultimate shame.*

"You're making that face again."

My furrowed brow was suddenly squished by an index and middle finger. Taken by surprise, I was unready for them to split both ways and iron out the crease between my eyes.

"...Margit."

Had these fingers been a dagger, I would have been dead. But, as ever, it was just the hand of my lifelong partner—who hadn't gotten sick enough of my antics to leave my side despite all that had happened.

"Those wrinkles will stick. You aren't young anymore, you know. Do be careful."

"Sorry."

Appearing out of nowhere, Margit was lavishly dressed to match my formal attire for the day. Cute beyond her years, she pulled off a look most women her age would struggle to own: thin dark fabrics exposed swaths of her shoulders and stomach, and the white coat of a massive wolf served as her outerwear.



The look embodied the term “yakuza lady.” Although I found the antithetical air of dangerous allure to suit her well, I had no doubt there would be much murmuring over the depravity her looks no doubt betrayed if she hadn’t also made it so clear that she’d been molded in the city’s shadows. The object of the rumors, of course, being me and not her.

Sigh. Honestly, how had it ended up this way?

If I had at *least* gone crying to Mister Fidelio after the incident, we could have cooped up at the Snoozing Kitten and ridden out the chaos. That way, when the Baldur Clan and Heilbronn Familie had come to try and use what they saw as a weapon to crush their enemies with, I wouldn’t have snapped back and dug myself a deeper hole.

Then, maybe I wouldn’t be burning my days keeping the delicate balance between the underground players of Marsheim—maybe I could actually go on an *adventure*.

I’d crawled through too much urbanity. I should have known better: where were all the lessons I’d learned from those hapless PCs, stuck and struggling to escape draconic schemes as they danced in the alleys?

My whole ordeal was just a good example of lying with the dogs and waking with fleas. If some poet out there ever decided to write a parable to mock me, I would have nothing to say in my own defense.

“You’ve been drinking too much lately,” Margit said.

“Do you think? But this is still my first glass of the night.”

“Your first glass of something that a regular person would water down. Or do you think yourself an ogre or dvergar?”

I tried to make my case that a properly aged whiskey was best savored for its own qualities, but I could tell from her expression that she was wholly unconvinced. Standard fare in the Empire was to dilute even wines, and the recent Rhinian trend of mixology made straight liquor even less popular than it had once been.

Back in my twenties, I’d turned to the bottle as one of my few reprieves from

the mess I'd made for myself. That had led to a craving for highballs and gin fizzes and the like, so I'd gotten my people to invent club soda—to my own detriment. Although it had started as an unappreciated novelty, the refreshing sparkle had slowly gained ground until it escaped Marsheim's orbit and spread across Rhine as a bona fide fad.

Controlling the production had led to a tidy profit that I knew I shouldn't complain about, but I remained cross about how my preferred style of enjoying whiskey had been reduced to a "base" and "uncultured" habit.

"But it's good..."

"Personally, I have a difficult time considering something a 'drink' when one sip would be enough to knock me out cold."

"Doesn't that say more about you than me?"

"Oh? Take a look around, darling. Do you see anyone else partaking in unmixed whiskey as you do?"

I scanned the tavern; the only ones pounding back raw liquid gold were Miss Laurentius and a handful of others whose bodies naturally came with strong livers. *Speaking of which, don't think I don't see you, Dietrich. I know the bartender explicitly told you that bottle's off-limits—I'm not treating you to something that expensive. You better remember this.*

A-Anyway, I, uh...couldn't really find any examples to support my case. I was reminded of a soap opera I'd once watched where I heard that whiskey hadn't been popular in early Japan due to its strong odor and flavor; maybe it was like that.

"There, I win. Now won't you please drink like a normal person?"

You know, I'd put a lot of investment into skills and traits that let me steer a conversation, but I could never seem to come out on top against my other half. Margit poured out some carbonated water that she'd apparently had on her all along, and I was powerless to stop her as my whiskey bubbled into a highball.

"You know... I really can't ever say no to you," I sighed.

Margit was kind, but not soft. When I'd gotten so sick of it all that I'd turned

to violence as the solution to our problems, she had joined me...but when it'd come time to pay my due, she had offered no solace as I wallowed in the inevitable consequences.

Though, I supposed, she *was* still here by my side after all I'd done.

"Set aside saying no to *me* for a moment. What do you intend to tell Margrave Marsheim?"

"Come on... I don't want work to follow me all the way *here*."

"Don't tell that to me. It isn't my fault one of his illegitimate children has decided he wants to set off on an adventure."

"Waaah... That's it, I'm getting drunk."

Honestly, what was I supposed to do? People liked to tout me as the "Fixer" around town, but that just meant that the nobility saw me as a convenient handyman to toss their problems to. I would suck it up and keep my head down if they were just asking me to handle dirty work that I could be done with as soon as a target was dead, but playing daddy's clean-up crew for the margrave's parental oopsies was threatening to drive me mad. My reputation may have achieved the original plan of warding off reckless meddling, but it'd come with the unwanted assumption that I'd figure out any problem if it came my way.

I wanted to be an *adventurer*. City settings were well and good, but my preference was for the tried-and-true, hack-and-slash, save-the-world type stuff.

But look at me now. Here I was, snooping on affairs and breaking up gang fights caused by clan leaders deciding to date—every damn request that came my way was some stupid mediation. Tearing down the Baldurs and Heilbronns had mostly put an end to the bloodier side of my work, which was great, but everything else was just meaningless fucking chores!

And to top it all off, the doting buffoon we called a margrave wanted me to find his bastard son who'd run away from home. That moron. Just let the kid get a cruel taste of reality, and he'd come back home of his own accord in no time—where a fist to the face *should* be waiting.

Why couldn't this fool of a father just make his son reconsider himself, like a

parent? Why did he have to task me with shattering the boy's dreams *peacefully and without letting him get hurt?*

"Ugh... Maybe I should just drag the kid out dragon-hunting. Or to an ichor maze."

"While it's perfectly fine that you're confident in your ability to protect him, I suspect his mind would never recover from the trauma."

"But I can't just sic a bunch of thugs on a margrave's son... And it's not like I can put him down like that brat from earlier if everything goes south..."

As loyal a client as Margrave Marsheim was, I avoided his obnoxious busy-work whenever I could. He loved to praise me for "improving public safety" or whatever, and I appreciated his generous loans, but I swore the man had me confused for some kind of private investigation bureau. When he'd come crying about his lawfully wedded wife sneaking behind his back, I'd found her preparing him a *birthday surprise*—the number of times I had to deal with these sorts of ridiculous punchlines was itself a joke.

These weren't my kind of sessions. My old tablemates had been looney fellows who would've appreciated the convoluted messes here; I could just hear them shouting, "This isn't a comedy night!" through wheezing laughter now. That these zany situations managed to miraculously end with a happily ever after was a miracle beyond me.

If only I could find a spell to drag over souls from my old world. I wanted nothing more than to outsource all these ludicrous chores and flee to a faraway land.

"Ugh, dammit. At this rate, we may as well change our job descriptions."

"Hehe, you have a point there, darling. It's hard to call this line of work 'adventuring.'"

"I mean... The part where we're marching headfirst into trouble hasn't changed."

I responded to my partner's cheek-poking teasing with my best retort, but her smile let me know that she'd seen through my tough front.

Argh, I want to throw everything away and set off on a fun adventure...

But for now...the gods-awful weight of my responsibilities had me stuck and anchored down.

[Tips] Erich the Fixer is an adventurer known for exerting influence over every clan in Marsheim. In recent years, however, he has become a semi-official peacekeeper of sorts, deputized by the powers that be for his ability to prevent strife between adventuring factions. More than a few people have already forgotten that he is technically an adventurer in his own right.

Afterword

Though I usually begin by offering thanks to my grandmother, I would like to head this afterword with an apology to my editor for my massive failure to meet deadlines for this volume. The snail's pace of my pen was compounded by a slew of extraneous factors in my life, and I'm terribly sorry for the stress I inflicted upon you.

As for the Western-sci-fi-novel inspired list of thanks that has become my norm, I will be skipping over it as I only have two pages of afterword this time around.

Getting to the story, the character creation process has truly been a long one—so long that I can imagine some readers will accuse me of playing GURPS on my lonesome to have filled out literal books' worth just in a character's personal history.

The main plot of volume seven is that Erich has finally become an adventurer, but a certain someone gets in the way of him enjoying his long-sought days of beginner questing. I'd outlined the general plot back during the web publication of this arc, and now I finally have a chance to shine the spotlight on some characters I never had the chance to introduce.

At the time, I'd wanted to use this section of the story to say, "Not all sessions have a climax!" but seeing that bound to a single book is rather unexciting. It is only now that I realize how easy it had been to write campaigns for my old muscle-brained friends—er, I mean to say, my friends who were so well acquainted with classic story beats. Rarely, and I mean *rarely*, did I ever see the bosses I spent sleepless nights crafting go to waste due to an important connection or a well-time verbal beatdown. Frankly, it was more common for my bosses to be laughed out of the room by their unethical munchkin builds; but hey, no hard feelings. Not. At. All.

I've been told brevity is the soul of wit and that by extension I'm predisposed to witless sarcasm, so I will leave it at that. On a more earnest note, I'm happy to say that the seventh volume's special edition has once again come with dice

—and even character tokens! Now we can put the statistically anomalous gold-and-blue die aside and roll 2D6 with characters that seem like they'd have higher expected values!

Furthermore, the manga adaptation has also begun publication under the wonderful Uchida Temo, sure to preach the good word of proclivities yet unknown to us. At the time of writing, three chapters have been released. I'd love if you would take a look at the world given form—it's a wonderful supplement to the core books.

2022 has been a good year for me. I achieved both the production of physical dice and the serialization of a manga; on top of that, I managed to spend another year as a Real Author as opposed to a self-proclaimed one. It's a little early yet, but I want to offer my year's greetings because its end will be fast approaching by the time this afterword is published.

If I am given the honor of another volume, I suspect it will follow a poor countryside boy being badgered by some blond weirdo; I hope that you will continue to support me through it. Perhaps in part as a reaction to the lack of action in this volume, I plan to flesh out the climax until all my readers are once again confused at the amount of new material.

Well, then. Please hold on to your record sheets until next time—be sure not to lose them!

[Tips] The author uploads side stories and world-building details to @Schuld3157 on Twitter as "extra replays" and "rulebook fragments."